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What to watch for this year

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AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG

PC PowerPlay

SINCE 1996

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DIABLO IV

WE GO HANDS-ON TO FIND OUT.

DOOM ETERNAL
THE CLASSIC SHOOTER IS BACK, AND MORE BRUTAL THAN EVER BEFORE!

DOTA UNDERWORLDS
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And on into 2020!

And just like that, the year turns, and here we are with our first full issue for the year. We've put our first Technical Handbook out, and now it's back to the best games and hardware on PC.

And boy is there a lot of both, and it's only March! We still have big releases to come later in the year, but it already feels like the first few months of 2020 have lasted nearly all year. Which I guess it has, but you know what I mean. Big games, big hardware, and there's nine months left to go.

So it's a good time to look ahead, and this issue we round up the big games we're looking forward to. We play Diablo IV – and kinda liked it! – get bloody with Doom Eternal, and don't even get me started on the wealth of RPGs down the track, from a new Pathfinder game to Path of Exile 2.

Zombie Army 4 overwhelmed us with – unsurprisingly – zombies, and there's a mess of hot peripherals on review as well.

Good lord... Thankfully, we can relax with some less intense games, like the delightful Wattam, or just kick back and ponder a PC case upgrade with our group test.

Whatever you're into, there's a LOT of it.

David Hollingworth

"How does it do anything with those tiny little arms?!"

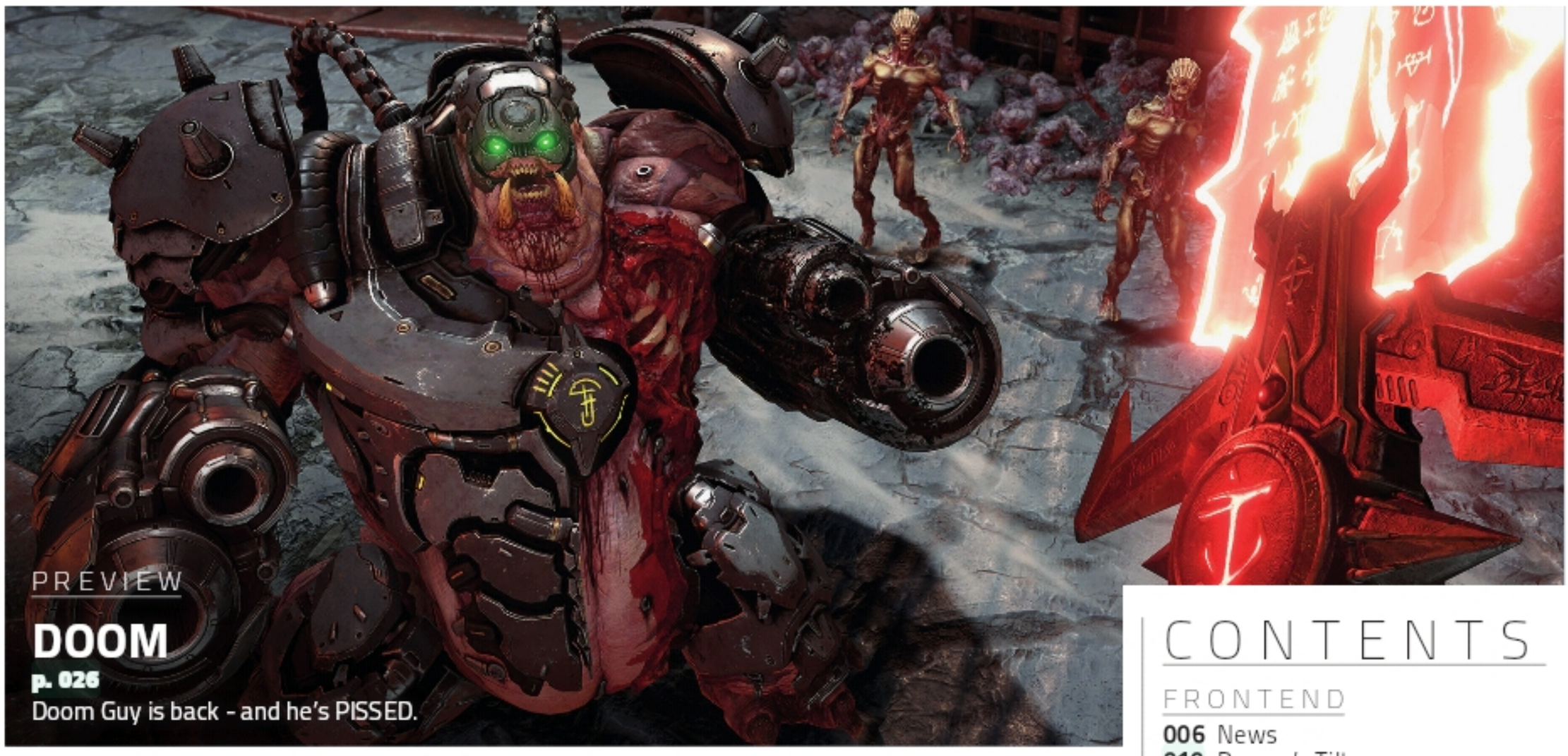
PCPP #280

ON THE COVER

DIABLO IV

p. 038

Click... Click... DING!



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DOOM

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Doom Guy is back - and he's PISSED.

REVIEW

ZOMBIE ARMY 4

p. 063

Saving Private dead-guy.

REVIEW

SUPER CRUSH KO

p. 066

Knocked out.

REVIEW

WATTAM

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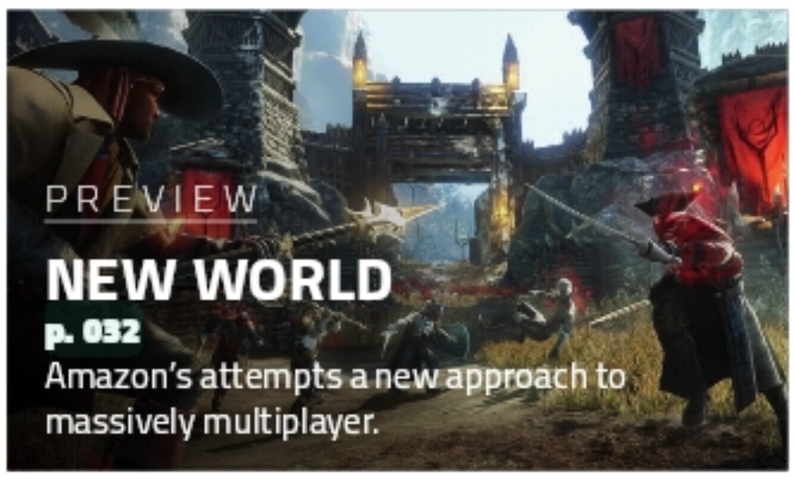
Wholesome fun.

REVIEW

JOURNE TO THE SAVAGE PLANET

p. 071

Don't stop believin'.



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NEW WORLD

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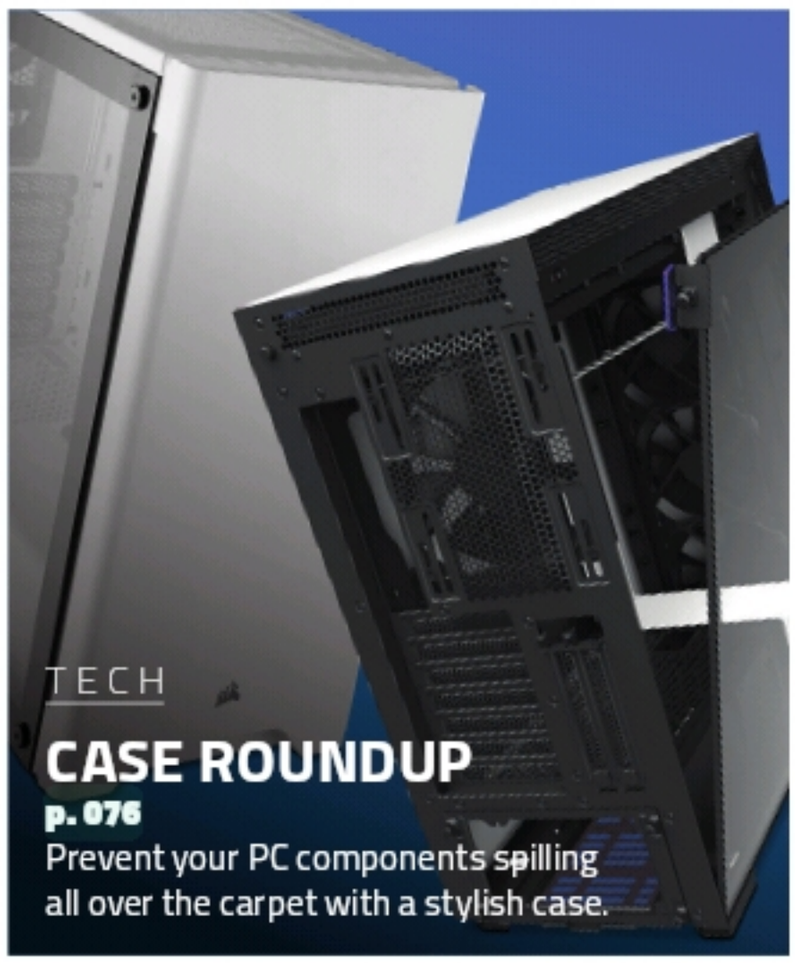
Amazon's attempts a new approach to massively multiplayer.



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CASE ROUNDUP

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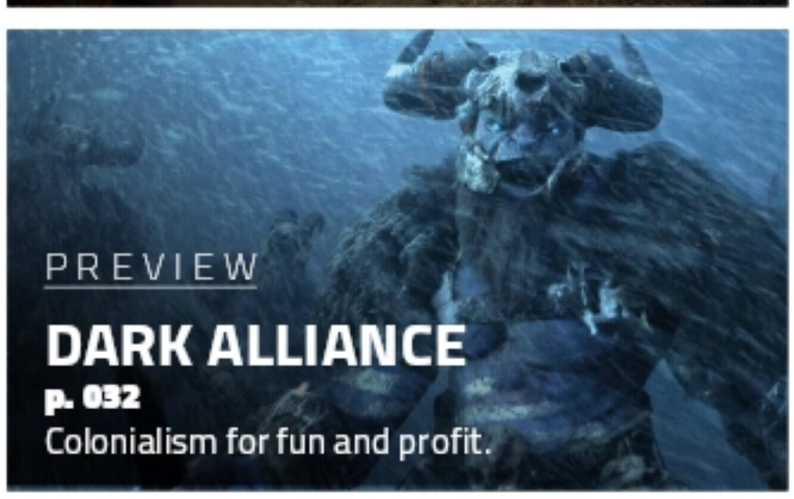
Prevent your PC components spilling all over the carpet with a stylish case.



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Colonialism for fun and profit.

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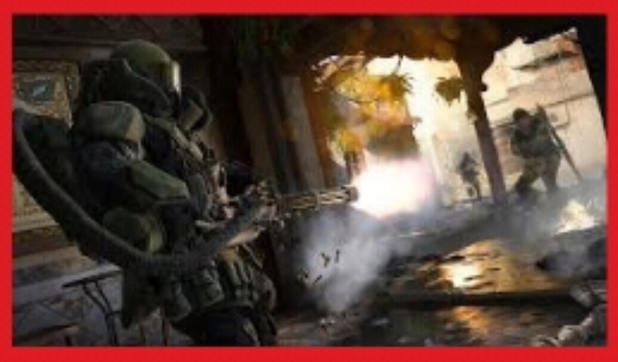

THE CALL OF DUTY MOVIE IS DELAYED INDEFINITELY, SAYS THE DIRECTOR

The movie is not Oscar Mike.
Speaking to Italian entertainment outlet Bad Taste, director Stefano Sollima said the project has "stood still" for two years.

"Well, the Call of Duty film has remained a bit like this ... We wrote the script with Scott Silver, which is who wrote Joker, and let's say that the idea of expanding the universe, the world of Call of Duty to film, it is no longer at the moment an industrial priority..."

CD PROJEKT HAS BECOME EUROPE'S SECOND-BIGGEST VIDEOGAME COMPANY

They're now valued at over US$8 billion, which is a lot of coins.
Over the last few months CD Projekt has had its market value go from US$6.8 billion to over US$8 billion, thanks to the popular Netflix series boosting sales of The Witcher games by as much as 554%, as well as the release of a Switch port of The Witcher 3 (which now has save game integration with Steam and GOG copies, by the way). Anticipation for Cyberpunk 2077 obviously remains strong as well. The number one slot in Europe still belongs to France's Ubisoft Entertainment, whose valuation goes as high as US$9.6 billion.

Game News

New Halo-inspired Nerf guns also give you in-game cosmetics in Halo Infinite

Live out your Master Chief fantasies.

Nerf is making a line of Halo toys in time for this fall's Halo Infinite. The current lineup consists of three different toy guns that shoot the company's classic foam bullets. The marquee toy in the new lineup is probably the MA40 Blaster, which is not just a new gun coming to Halo Infinite, but it's also the biggest of the trio coming from Nerf. On top of that, buyers will also receive a code to use in the game to unlock the toy's color scheme for the same gun.

If you prefer something more compact, two more toys are coming via Nerf's Microshots line, which are often single-hand, smaller guns. In the case of the Halo Infinite toys, that includes the iconic Covenant firearm, the Needler, as well as a UNSC weapon called the SPNKR. Each of these Microshots toys will come with two darts and fires one at a time. The smaller two items will retail for US$10 while the biggest of the trio will sell for US$50. All three will begin to hit major retailers on October 1.

Overwatch and Diablo animated series are reportedly in the works at Netflix

New leaks suggests Blizzard and Netflix are making animated shows together.

Netflix is working on animated shows based on both the Overwatch and Diablo game franchises, according to President of Activision-Blizzard Nick van Dyke, who has listed the projects in his LinkedIn profile.

According to said profile, Van Dyke is an "Executive producer of Diablo, a TV adaptation of Blizzard Entertainment's IP, rendered in anime style [...] currently in pre-production for distribution worldwide through Netflix."

A little further down, the resume also refers to "an animated series based [on] Blizzard's Overwatch franchise." While Netflix isn't explicitly mentioned here, we can take an educated guess that the streaming service is involved, given that it's working on a similar adaptation for Blizzard's Diablo IP.

That said, neither Blizzard nor Netflix have confirmed anything officially, so there's still no guarantee that either of these projects will get off the ground. New shows get greenlit and cancelled all the time, but here's hoping that these two will eventually see the light of day.

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Eternity's End

WarCraft III: Reforged was Dead On Arrival. But who killed it, and why?

All too often in the world of video games the news seems simply too stupid to be true. An anime-styled Hitman knock-off has been in production for seven years, and the dev still hasn't implemented a save game feature? Willing customers paid a quarter of a billion dollars in exchange for a buggy tech demo running on a ten-year-old fork of CryEngine 3? A prominent game company CEO admitted to losing a USB stick full of barely-legal squirt porn in a novelty restaurant? You read such headlines, and you feel your eyes have betrayed you. These stories can't possibly be true. Yet they are. For all its contributions to the field of high art, the games industry is a fount of scandals that push our collective credulity beyond its limits.

Whenever I read of some bizarre new controversy, my gaze reflexively darts to the bottom right of the screen. I check the date, and double check it, just to make sure that I'm not within that 48 hour window that rolls around each year when the games companies issue press releases about exciting new titles like 'World of Wartrains' and 'Pimps at Sea'.

Is it April the 1st here in Australia? Or is it April the 2nd, but still April the 1st in the office of some try-hard American social media peon? The answer is almost always 'no.' Then with a heavy heart I try to rationalise it. Surely someone is just joshing? Surely this is some kind of... Out-Of-Season April Fool's Joke?

For the past year most of these developments have come from the Fallout 76 eco-system. I particularly liked when Bethesda deduced that anyone still playing this buggy nightmare must be so afflicted by Stockholm Syndrome that they'd gladly pay for a subscription service on top of the premium game price.

But a cock-up to rival Todd's code-tastrophie emerged with the launch of Warcraft III: Reforged. Materially worse than its original release by every metric, Blizzard offered gamers one tiny skerrick of decency in this whole debacle: they waited until Warcraft III was 18 years old before they fucked it.

This is a farrago on a scale that crushes the imagination. Where to begin? There's the uneven tone of the graphics 'upgrade' – a mish-mash of textures and models that ape the misguided enhancements of the very worst in HD remasters.

There's the mass culling of features: Clans, automated tournaments, LAN and offline play, and ranked ladders... all gone.

There's the forced downgrading of the client for Warcraft III Classic owners who didn't even buy Reforged, and weren't planning to.

There's the sloppily coded main menu that somehow consumes more system resources than the game itself. There's the new EULA that decrees that all user-created content will be the exclusive property of Activision Blizzard.

And so much more! But do the bullet points tell the whole story? Yes. They do. The backlash against Warcraft III: Reforged was so overwhelming it now has the lowest user-rated Metacritic score in existence.

Normally an insultingly bad game launch will be defended by a phalanx of twee contrarians: "The devs worked really hard and deserve our support!" "Coders might lose their jobs! You don't want their families to suffer, do you?" "Any and all criticism of this defective product is TOXIC!!" But even the tireless Brand Defenders were silent for this one.

How could this happen? How could a name once synonymous with quality sink so low? Because games aren't made by brands, they're made by people, and the best designers at Blizzard left long ago. Figures like Chris Metzen, Mike Morhaime, and even controversial navel enthusiast Mark Kern are long gone. What's left is a bureaucratic machine that makes most of its money cranking out mobile games for China.

JAMES COTTEE

We tried lowering James into his grave once, but the bastard has declared he plans to only die once Star Citizen comes out. That's one way to get immortality...

While I am not privy to sensitive internal documents at Activision Blizzard, I strongly suspect their current business plan is to migrate software development away from what readers of this magazine would recognise as 'video games,' and towards the lucrative poker machine market. Pubs and clubs across the land will soon be filled with brightly illuminated upright cabinets that will gobble up your cash in exchange for pleasing sound-bites you dimly remember from your halcyon youth. "Dabu!" "Zug Zug!" "Something Need Doing?" "Tap Your Debit Card to Continue!"

Remember when Activision Blizzard CEO Bobby Kotick boasted about bringing in executives from the packaged goods industry to "take all the fun out of making video games"? He's succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. And, ironically, he's created a shiny new package for Blizzard's reputation: a coffin. With the launch of Warcraft III: Reforged, he's begun lowering it gently into its grave... PC

"A cock-up to rival Todd's code-tastrophie emerged with the launch of Warcraft III: Reforged."

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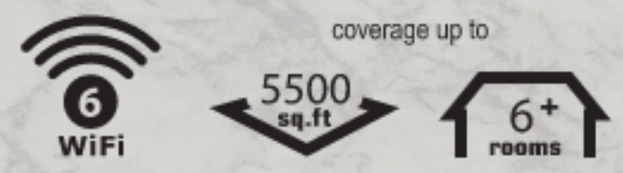

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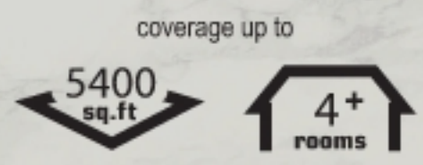

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Pinball warlock

How the wild flipper action of Demon's Tilt evolved in Early Access.

Demon's Tilt didn't have bowling, at first. It had a chimera, sure, and an occult priestess whose eyes glowed a blazing pink when she hurled your pinball in a circle around her head. It had a pentagram (actually, several pentagrams), and pulsing rings of bullets that pummelled your ball as you battled your way upward from the bottom of the table. Hard to imagine what else a game promising *Occult Pinball Action* could need, really, but Demon's Tilt creator Adam Ferrando had time on his hands. After launching Demon's Tilt in Steam Early Access last January, he set to work squashing bugs and then figuring out how to expand a pinball game. Why not a bowling minigame?

It's ridiculous enough to feel perfectly in line with Demon's Tilt's aesthetic, full of skeletons, homunculi and heavy metal schlock. It's heavily inspired by the '90s Japanese 'Crush' pinball games, most famously Devil's Crush for the TurboGrafx-16. Devil's Crush was a similar three-screen-tall pinball table crawling with fantasy monsters to slay, but beyond those basic common elements, it was a game that made people go 'what the hell?' when they first came across it.

"My relationship with the Turbo Crush games is like the hidden gem thing," Ferrando says. "Nothing beats finding something so weird. That's what I wanted to put into [Demon's Tilt]: giving you something so weird you didn't know you wanted, and it finding a cult audience."

Making a pinball game, though, was more of a practical decision than a lifelong dream. Ferrando is an artist and comes from a background in the toy industry. He's never made a videogame. Pinball, blessedly, requires no AI programming, and the programming it does involve revolves around some simple mechanics. Gravity, flippers, and switches. "It's 90 per cent design, and everything else is relatively simple," he says.

Demon's Tilt felt unusually fully-formed when it launched into Early Access, but that's kind of the nature of a pinball table. You can't easily add new weapons or enemies or levels. The table itself needed to be mostly complete, and fun to play. As he was designing it, Ferrando decided a key part of the experience was full-table multiball – meaning when players fulfil a certain objective and launch a multiball frenzy, the entire playfield would be fair game. That meant Demon's Tilt couldn't be carved up into multiple smaller sub-tables or progress from one screen to another; it also meant that the table itself had to, essentially, be finished.

"I forced myself to put a lot of content into the main table before

MORE 'TABLES'

Most pinball games play it straight, emulating the design of real physical pinball. But recently indie devs have done entirely new things with basic pinball mechanics. Yoku's Island Express is part pinball, part Metroid. And Creature in the Well is a hack 'n' slash with dungeons built like pinball tables.

act id:65706547 act id:65706547

FAR LEFT: There are sub-tables found in EX mode.

LEFT: It gets kind of like *Gator Panic* at some points.

FACES OF EVIL *Smash these occult figures with your ball for big points*

LILITH THE PRIESTESS
The centrepiece of the table. When her eyes start to bleed, you know things are heating up.

THE CHIMERA
The Chimera guards an ultra jackpot and the ball lock, key to triggering multiball.

HOMUNCULI
Man, this thing is just gross. So fling your balls at its many faces... that also sounds gross.

CTHULAMARI
Can't have the occult without Cthulhu, right? He spews attacks like he's in a bullet hell shmup.

tackling sub-tables," he says. "I didn't know if we were going to get to do them. We thought, we want to come out content-complete, so the game needs to stand on its own without these extras. So really the extras we added were giving people more of what they liked. I wanted the main experience to stand on its own."

THE DEVIL'S IN THE DETAILS

The final version of Demon's Tilt adds three sub-tables, which remind me of some of the coolest pinball tables I've played, where you can launch the ball onto a small mini table above the playfield. Demon's Tilt's are all inspired by different arcade games, including the classic Gator Panic – you know, the one where you smash a bunch of plastic gators with an oversized foam mallet. The bowling sub-table is delightfully thorough, with a legit custom UI for spares and strikes and frames, and a lane that trades pins for tombstones and a giant skull backdrop.

"One thing I didn't expect was for people to like the original balance," Ferrando says. "But since people liked the vanilla game so much, there's now an EX mode.

"I just made EX mode a little bit harder, and have deeper rules. People can always play the original vanilla version, and EX has the new sub-tables and a new final boss, and there's the bowling sub-game. That was all produced in Early Access."

Getting the feel of everything in Demon's Tilt just right was less of a science and more pressing play a hundred times a day. It's not realistic, like digital games that try to simulate physical pinball. It's designed to feel good first and foremost, which means little touches, like balls never losing momentum halfway up ramps and then plummeting back down. For a first game, Demon's Tilt required surprisingly little redesigning in Early Access. Ferrando and his publisher Ralph Barbagallo scrambled to release a few quick patches fixing collision issues, and added a 'ball stuck' mechanic that they say is now redundant, after a year of further tweaking.

The biggest benefit of Early Access proved to be the positive reviews of its small fanbase. "I went and asked people I know that are smarter than me what to expect from launching a game, but nobody had launched a pinball game," Barbagallo laughs. "So I was pleased. People liked it. The reviews were good. One of the biggest challenges we had with this game in general was that people would be like 'oh, it's just pinball'. But we're like, well it's not really just pinball. It's more than that. We had a hard time getting traction with festivals, things like that, before the game was out. The perception was just 'I'll buy a table for a few bucks in one of these pinball games'. But it's more than that, it's a whole game. Once reviews started coming out, it found this audience of people that got it. I guess it's a little on the nose, but it got the ball rolling, so to speak."

Since releasing the Catacombs update last year, which added the sub-tables, they've spent months optimising the code and working on a port for Xbox, which launched last December, and is devilishly good fun.

WES FENLON PC

> "I just made EX mode a little bit harder, and have deeper rules."

Gen XX

Saturday Night Fever

One of the many warning signs of a serious alcohol addiction.

The weird thing about alcohol in games is that it (almost always) doesn't have any kind of (real life) effect. You use it to get a buff, or to choose a darker narrative path, or to see if something goofy will happen. It's an abstraction. In real life, alcohol always creates a physical or emotional feeling. Sometimes, it's a chill buzz with friends, other times it's sadness, or violence. I wish I could say I was naive to some of alcohol's more harmful qualities, but I'm not. In fact, I'd wager that most people have been touched by alcohol, in some damaging way, by the age of 41.

I recently described Disco Elysium to a friend as, "Constantly devastating." Sure, this is a cop story, but one in which the protagonist is confronted with illness, shame, ridicule and pity at every turn. The game begins with a blackout so severe he can't even remember his name (and he introduces himself to people as the flamboyant, but highly implausible, "Raphael Ambrosius Costeau"). This made my stomach turn. Note that I'd usually refer to my character as "me" but this was too much shame to roleplay up front. I became Harry, in my mind, somewhat later.

In my experience, people who abuse drugs often blame themselves and expect this kind of mistreatment from others. Society widely assumes all people can use (legal) drugs moderately, disregarding genetic and circumstantial risk factors, as well as comorbidities for drug abuse, like mental health disorders. Sometimes, however, people will surprise you with understanding and forgiveness. In Disco Elysium, this person is Kim Kitsuragi, your partner on a murder investigation. I marvelled at his kindness and serenity.

This is not to say that Kim was never exasperated by my actions or that he indulged my madness. We met two wannabe gang members wearing jackets emblazoned with "Fuck the World" and "PissF******t". One dialogue option asks Kim which jacket he'd wear if we could wear them together and I desperately wanted to know the answer. After some cajoling, he chose PissF******t. Incredibly, I passed a check and convinced the thugs to give me their jackets, but then Kim wouldn't wear Pissf******t. I was so disappointed and I'm not even sure why.

Self-destruction meets steely, unconditional love is never going to be a healthy romance, but it can absolutely frame a friendship. I asked Kim (seeking reassurance) why he stuck with me and he made guarded remarks about me (actually) being a good cop. I certainly learned more about Kim, but I never fully grasped why he was so faithful. The choices I made were chaotic and feverish. I pointed his gun at a child. I wanted to fulfil the quest, "Find speed and sniff it," because I was embarrassed I'd nearly removed my pants, in company, for an almost logical reason.

I could have played Harry as clean, to try to redeem his sorry arse, but I didn't. The game does a really good job of making drug-use seem compelling. For starters, Harry's internal narrative unfolds based on the skills you're investing in. Electrochemistry ruminates about a spilled patch of booze on a table and begs you to lick it. Drugs also raise skill caps, as if intensifying your personality, but become so dangerous. The station's Lazarus begged me to stop drinking. I kept drinking. Why? It never stopped making sense; confusing, wrong, pitiable, destructive sense.

It's not as if there's no warning about the dangers of alcohol/drugs in Disco Elysium. My favourite quest was one Harry just (kind of) invented. He saw a woman and assumed her husband was missing. Despite her insisting he wasn't, Harry found her a random drunk.

I won Failbetter Games' Worlds of the Season competition (a while back) with a Storynexus project about clones terraforming Mars. My player character could get "jugsoaked" (drunk) and romance the (obviously inanimate) umbrella stand, as kind of a twisted substitute for the game's actual (slightly scary) romance. It ended badly. I must have traumatised at least a couple of players, because they still mention it to me occasionally. Regrettably, I don't think my game had a Kim Kitsuragi. It was his faith that inspired me to (eventually) love Harry unconditionally, too. PC

MEGHANN O'NEILL could write another 20 pages on Disco Elysium. Even just the way the characters are named is a whole page; Gary the Cryptofascist, The Racist Lorry Driver, and so on. What a game.

> One dialogue option asks Kim which jacket he'd wear if we could wear them together and I desperately wanted to know the answer.

GARTE, THE CAFETERIA MANAGER – "What?"
REACTION SPEED [Easy: Success] – By the way – you should come back to this "thing"-based questionnaire if you see anything interesting in the Whirling later!
YOU – "By the way, I'm going to sing karaoke here."
GARTE, THE CAFETERIA MANAGER – "Absolutely out of the question."
VOLITION [Medium: Success] – You wait and see, cafeteria manager!
INLAND EMPIRE [Easy: Success] – Absolutely "in" the question! First we find a "sad" banger, then we sing this place to SHIT.
1. - "So, about that money I owe..."
2. - "Garte, I saw another "thing" at the Whirling..."
3. - "Good bye." [Leave.]
09:00

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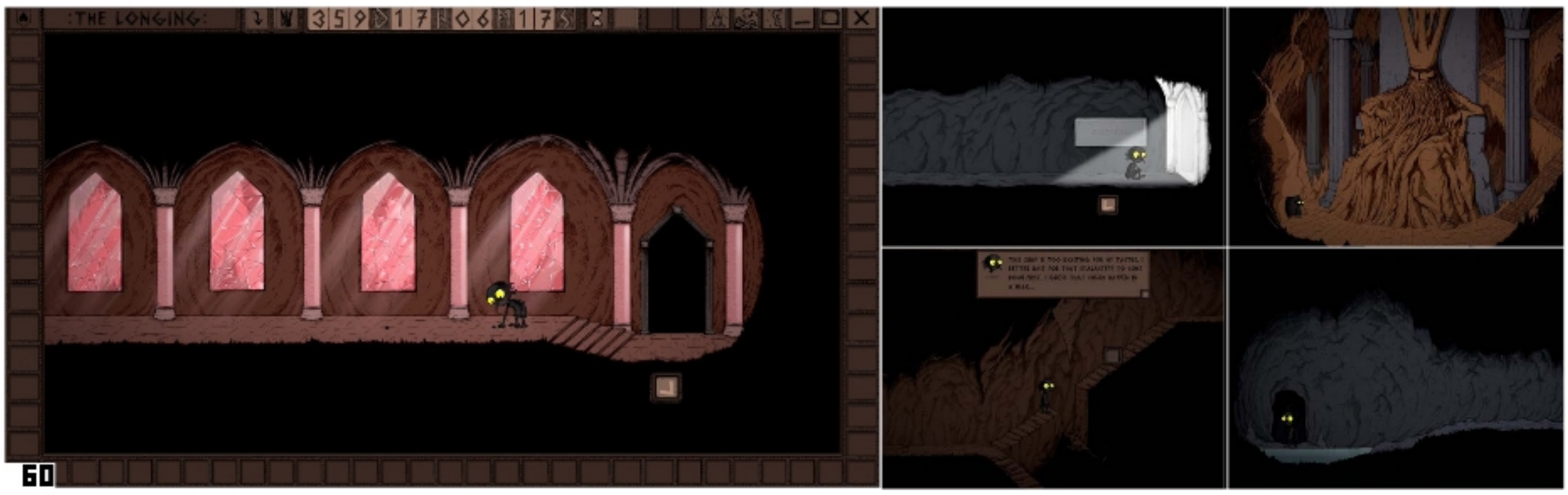
A collection aside

What do idle games, bees, extremely difficult platformers, experimental mechanics and Chinese dynasties have in common? If you can think of something, you should probably be writing this blurb. MEGHANN O'NEILL begins her new year with an assortment of weird and wonderful experiences. Indie games are the spice of life, after all. Although her new year's resolution is to find time to play more non-review games, she will definitely be playing one of these into 2021. If you're looking for something new, read on.



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THE LONGING

DEVELOPER STUDIO SEUFZ • **PRICE** TBA • **RELEASE** 5TH MARCH, 2020
https://store.steampowered.com/app/893850/THE_LONGING/

I'm pretty sure The Longing has broken my 9 year old's brain. "Mum, what are you doing in this game, exactly?" he asks. "I'm waiting for 400 days to pass, in real life." I reply. "Wait, what?" As usual, he's incredulous. "So, in 400 days, like around February, 2021, I have to wake the king." "WAIT, WHAT?!" "He needs to regain his power and that's how long it'll take." "And that's it?" "Well, I can explore, but I don't have to. Sometimes I'll find a piece of coal and, if I have 5, I can make a fire. It burns for a few (real life) hours and then stops." "WAAAIT, WHAAAT?!?"

I'm not confused by his confusion, because the game speaks to the weary, mature part of me. I have a room where I can make music (if I can find components to assemble an instrument.) There's a bookshelf and I'm part ways through Thus Spake Zarathustra, which has always fascinated me (after studying Strauss' tone poem of the same name) but never quite enough to actually read it. Why am I reading it in a game? It's as noble a pursuit as any, for entirely unstructured time. The Longing is an escapist fantasy for adults with responsibilities.

It's also an intrusive thoughts simulator. To the right of my room, the king slumbers in a grand chamber. The music depicts power and anticipation, through the use of wide, compound chords, perhaps inviting me to wake him early. It's a constant, looping climax. If I woke the king now (and the game ended badly), I'd lose six weeks from the clock. What if I can't resist waking him on day 350? What if my kids play without my permission and WAKE HIM? (I'm glad I didn't think to wake him in the first 5 mins of play. The tension of not knowing is incredible.)

Equally tense and unknowable is the amazing "Eternity". I found this bright and beautiful place at the end of a complex tunnel system. A sign reads "Only a fool tries to reach the end of Eternity". Did I start trying to reach the end of Eternity? Of course I did. I have hundreds of days and no commitments, so why not? A short way into my journey I got a sense things felt wrong. I looked at the clock. It had stopped. I immediately started back towards the entrance in a panic. Failure, curiosity, sunk costs. My son may not be able to relate to these yet. I certainly can.

Another thing the average 9 year old doesn't appreciate, in life or as a gamer, is patience. As well as a maddeningly slow, enforced walking pace, and doors that take minutes to open, I found a cliff that was too dangerous to climb down. My character noticed moss growing at the bottom. I came back two (real life) weeks later, for a soft landing and new areas to explore. Thankfully, once you've found a place, you can remember it and walk back automatically. This still takes time, so I often have The Longing open in a window while my character walks.

Overall, I'm finding this unusual idle game fascinating, even if my son is still coming around to it. He had a couple more questions that were actually very thought provoking. "What happens if you forget to wake the king on Day 400?" I've now marked it on our family calendar. "What if you find a way to leave the caves?" It's hinted that this is possible, yet forbidden. Given my avatar's lonely life and unquestioningly servile manner, I suspect this choice may be extremely difficult to make, as the final deadline approaches. Start now and you won't be far behind.

> "I'm not confused by his confusion, because the game speaks to the weary, mature part of me."

HIVE TIME

DEVELOPER J BUSH PRODUCTIONS • **PRICE** CHOOSE YOUR OWN PRICE • **RELEASE** OUT NOW
https://cheeseness.itch.io/hive-time

I've learned everything I know about ants and bees from videogames. Empires of the Undergrowth introduced me to why ants walk in a line. (They leave complex pheromone trails for each other to follow, often towards food.) In The Sims 4, bees are dormant in Winter, which is (largely) true in real life, too. You can also mobilise your Sim's bees to attack enemies, which (I assume) is just as accurate. I figured Hive Time would teach me something, but the game's lessons are less specific and grander, concerning balance and fragility.

You start with a queen, a few bees and some wax. You need an exit for foraging, to collect nectar and pollen. Then, a wax assembler, nursery and workshop. If you want to spawn a new queen in the required 7200 seconds (or 2 hours), an extraordinary amount of jelly is required, to be generated from the starting resources and honey. To research the related storage and refineries, you'll need hundreds of chunks of pollen and nectar, as well as bees to collect them. It's straightforward, but also quite challenging. I certainly needed to learn and start over.

If you're building badly, Hive Time will play like an idle game. You'll be waiting for your stores to fill so that there's enough pollen required for the next of many, nonlinear research projects (before you research upgraded storage, with more management options). I prioritised Foragers and Workers in my nursery, before realising I actually needed more exits. If you have more than the upper limit of one bee type, their lifespans are halved. Then, of course, I realised I could build multiple nurseries and dramatically increase the hive's population overall.

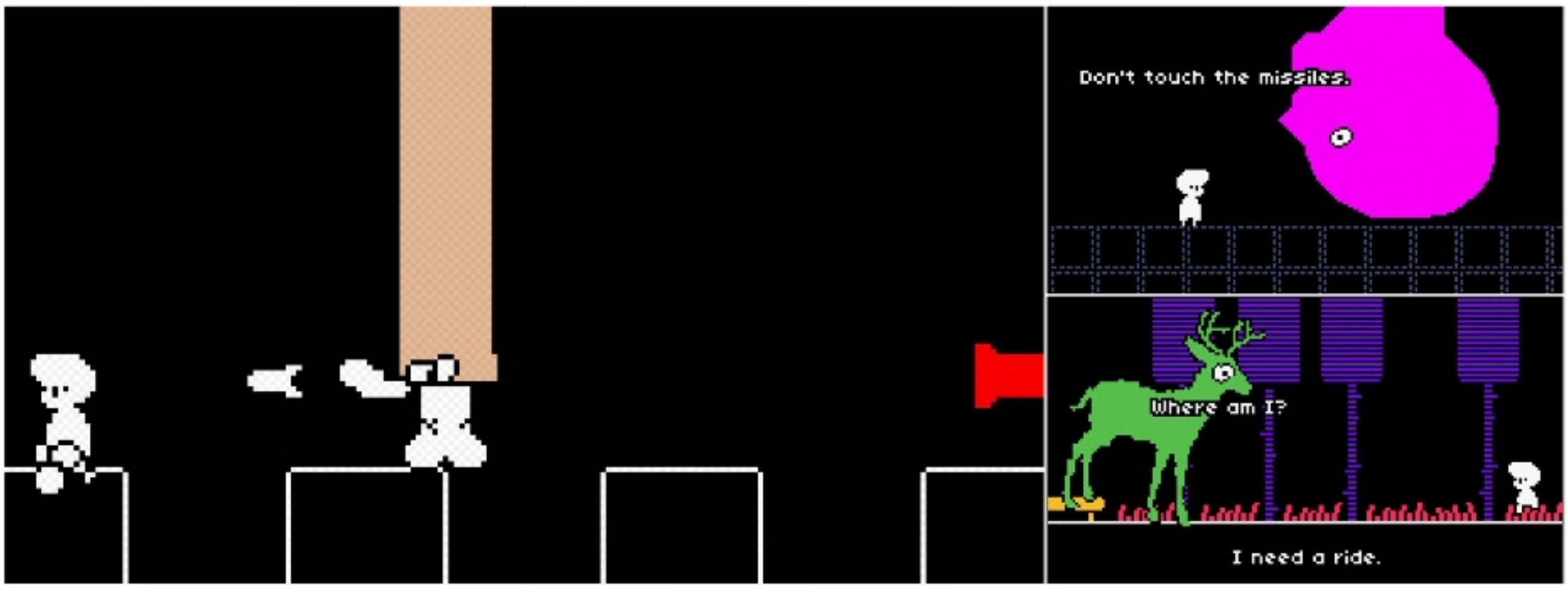
It's really easy to mess up the composition of your bee population. You need Beesitters (who raise babies in cute hexes filled with baby toys) to generate bees more rapidly, but all the other types, including Defenders, have essential roles, too. If a random event, like a visiting group of Workers, suddenly inspires 20 bees to become Workers, the delicate productivity of your hive declines rapidly. Having said this, the bee lifespan is very short and, with a few tweaks, getting back on track can be achieved very quickly.

The game isn't meant to be about 'actual bees'. Instead, these anthropomorphic creatures worry about things like auditioning for Hive and Away, or the Workers at the Wax Assembler will make crayons for the nursery and get drawings in return. Many of the tiny increments of story have consequences, like lending precious jelly to a caterpillar, who then returns it (with interest) later, as a butterfly. The music is a combination of minimalist elements, like marimba textures, and melodies, which beautifully suits the game's relentless action and quirky quality.

Hive Time also features recordings of bees from designer Josh "Cheeseness" Bush's local area. Especially given you can choose how much to pay, it is a surprisingly deep and complicated experience. Bush says, "I wanted to make something that expresses how fragile diversity can be." I enjoyed failing, learning, succeeding and being inspired to search for more information about beekeeping online. I'm not sure I'm quite ready to get a hive in real life. SimAnt taught me that tiny creatures will always overthrow the humans nearby, at any rate.

WASP CONSTRUCTION
LIVE
NEW SHOW
COMPANY!
"I'm selling these fine yellow jackets"
A performing wasp construction crew held several shows near the hive recently, inspiring a portion of the hive's population to become Builders. They're not too bad at it.
Good times

> These anthropomorphic creatures worry about things like auditioning for Hive and Away.



STIKIR

DEVELOPER BILGE KAAN • **PRICE** $4.50 • **RELEASE** OUT NOW
https://store.steampowered.com/app/952200/stikir/

Stikir is a game that can be both very hard and very easy. It's hard when you're playing as you think you're meant to be playing, and easy (or easier) when you figure out how you're actually meant to be playing. Except when it's just hard. I guess it's a combination of platformer and puzzle game, where solving puzzles (sometimes) makes gameplay easier (or less impossible)? OK, fine, here's an example. I was trying to dodge missiles, yet every time I touched a floor piece, it would fall away. Moving more cleverly provided me with an unexpected advantage.

The game's story is (I think) an exploration of the designer's creative process. Certainly, in the opening, you fall through a hole, between too-wide platforms, onto the same level and the caption reads, "I should put something in between," then extra, moving platforms appear. Then it's suddenly a (seemingly infinite) racing game. Why? Because the designer is having trouble deciding on genre. How the mini-game with the mechanical fish-spaceship, who has eaten your basketball then tries to hook you on a line, fits into the narrative, I'm not entirely sure.

Stikir will (somehow) leave you both confused and satisfied. As a short and inspiring experience, I'd recommend it for game designers on their lunch break. I'd love for more games to surprise me like this, especially when I'm having trouble completing a level, only to realise there's actually a much easier way to approach it. Give my regards to the (really tough) level with the bones that come down to smash you, with holes in the floor, then missiles. If you can find an easier way to complete that one, please write in. (I couldn't.)

NEVER GIVE UP

DEVELOPER MASSIVE MONSTER, TASSLEFOOT • **PRICE** $21.50 • **RELEASE** OUT NOW
https://armorgamesstudios.com/games/never-give-up/

Every time I review a platformer, I complain that I'm terrible at platformers. I know many people love them. It's not that I hate them, it's just that constantly failing (especially with a review deadline looming) gives me high blood pressure. I first saw Never Give Up at PAX Australia, in 2019, and thought, "Oh great. Looks wonderful, guess I'll have to settle in." I wasn't expecting it to be an innovative experience that (finally) builds in the need to practice in a way which is motivating and effective. This may be the first time I've ever felt any good at this genre.

Of course, it's ironic that there's a "Give Up" button built in. If you press it, you're allowed to progress (after being cruelly taunted). This would usually be a platformer-inept reviewer's dream; being able to see content without needing to master it, yet I (initially) didn't use the button much at all. Why? You complete (a suspiciously easy) level, then it transforms so you have to complete it again, only with more obstacles and dangers added. So, you're learning the difficult maneuvers in small increments, then adding more. It's brilliant.

There are additional challenges, like to unlock (near-impossible to collect) items and a suggested speed to complete levels (um, no). It remains extremely tough, overall. I enjoyed the light story, like being taunted about the same pool of acid 600 times. Perhaps I was actually still pretty bad at this platformer, but the structure was so motivating that I was tricked into feeling good? In fact, I started giving up in the second region of six and I completely gave up at the boss there. (You can't skip bosses.) But this is still the first time I may actually go back for more.

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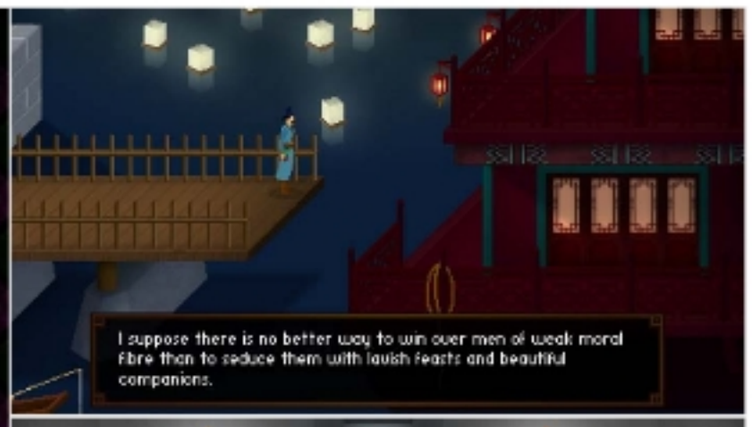
Then it is done. Rise now as my chief agent of justice! You are now the guardian of Chang'an, the jewel of China--finest city in the world.


I suppose there is no better way to win over men of weak moral fibre than to seduce them with lavish feasts and beautiful companions.

DETECTIVE DI: THE SILK ROAD MURDERS.

DEVELOPER NUPIXO GAMES • **PRICE** $15.50 • **RELEASE** OUT NOW
http://detectivedi.com/

I was complaining to my husband, over the holidays, that our kids will never experience the anticipation created by a colourfully wrapped game box appearing under the Christmas tree. An adventure would be inside, if it were for me. Didn't matter which adventure, it was whichever The Games Wizards had in, in December. It could have been the next Space Quest. Or a weird surprise, like Eternam. I wasn't a game reviewer as a child. I was entirely uncritical. Whatever was in the box was something to be savoured, the next thing to be solved, usually with my dad.

Detective Di: The Silk Rose Murders is not innovative or exemplary. It's firmly "more of the same", in the most positive sense. I may be nostalgic, but I know others understand this simple desire for more. Even my kids look forward to the next adventure, in their somewhat less intense way. Adventuring together is still fun. I recently saw a game developer tweet that game reviewers ask "Where are the adventures?" but then never review them. It's rare that I knock them back when they come through the PC Powerplay form. This is why.

With the exception of the Laura Bow series, I actually don't recall a lot of detective adventures under my tree. Sam and Max was (almost) after my time. There seem to be proportionally more now, like The Darkside Detective and Lamplight City. Solving crime works extremely well with adventure game mechanics; meeting new people, asking lots of questions, examining items, puzzling and so on. I wasn't sure if I liked the pixel hunting in Detective Di, until I reflected that 'looking carefully' is probably what real detectives do at crime scenes most of the time.

There's no way to highlight hotspots, so you have to observe the scene and find an object that is drawn to look disturbed, or out of place. Sometimes, markings or hidden clues peek out from behind a logical thing. Deductions are recorded on an investigation board, as you progress. There are several moments when you reenact crimes (through dialogue) after all the clues are collected but, disappointingly, I tried choosing the wrong responses and simply had to try again. There are no consequences for failure other than to feel a bit stupid.

Probably the most compelling aspect of the game is that you're solving a series of murders that are loosely based on history. You play as Di Renjie, Empress Wu Zetian's chancellor in the 7th Century. He's apparently quite famous, appearing as a character in numerous books and TV series. I'd never heard of him, but I've become quite enamoured with Chinese history after a trip to China. Every story is a soap opera with a diabolical twist, involving lovers, murders and intrigue. Detective Di weaves four of these (related) stories together masterfully.

Overall, it's a little wordy (and there's no voice acting) but if you love adventures, it's likely not a problem. My younger son isn't much of a reader, yet he enjoyed reading this aloud. (Have I told you the story of how my Year 1 teacher, Ms Watling, set Sierra's The Black Cauldron as my reading homework, instead of those annoying, tiny readers?) So, I haven't reviewed Detective Di: The Silk Rose Murders very thoroughly and I do apologise. Simply, adventures are more than the sum of their parts for me. If they are similar for you, this gift has your name on it.

> "Solving crime works extremely well with adventure game mechanics; meeting new people, asking lots of questions, examining items, puzzling and so on."

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DEVELOPER LARIAN STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE • **RELEASE** OCTOBER 20200
bit.ly/36sTicn

Divinity Original Sin the board game

Recreating the acclaimed RPG series in card and plastic.

While we usually deal only in pixels and microchips across these pages, we're making a special exception for Larian's new board game adaptation. Why? Because it cleaves so closely to the style of the games that they might as well have slapped Divinity Original Sin 3 on the box.

Any tabletop fan will know that fantasy dungeon crawlers are a dime a dozen these days. What makes DOStBG (hmm, not the best acronym) stand out is how elegantly it recreates the quirks of its source material.

The set-up is broadly familiar – joining a party of four adventurers, we select a character, represented by a plastic miniature and a handful of cards for our class and skills. A story book guides us through our quests, with prose to describe what's happening, and instructions for setting up the cards and tokens representing each encounter.

It's in combat that things get really exciting. As in the games, elemental magic is the star of the show. A set of easy to track mechanics allow you to douse enemies in oil before setting them on fire, pour rain over them to set them up for freezing or electrocution, and more. It ensures battles are far more than just rolling to hit – they're tense, tactical puzzles of careful area control and status management, with the interlocking effects creating emergent strategies. When our rogue catches fire and we work out the best way to put him out is for our wizard to attack him with a water wand, I know we're playing something special.

ROBIN VALENTINE PC

> "As in the games, elemental magic is the star of the show."

FLIP OUT
Locations are represented by a wheel of cards, each being a different area, such as a forest, a stables, or a cave. To explore, you move your character there and flip the card, reading out its text to discover clues, treasure, or enemies. The art actually provides subtle hints as to what you'll find.

MODEL CITIZEN

Your hero is represented by a plastic miniature for you to move around the board. You also have cards that detail your skills, abilities, and perks, most of which are taken directly from the games. You can even have a Pet Pal – in the demo we grill squirrels and horses for info.

DICE DICE BABY

Different attacks and skills roll different kinds of dice, which have different effects. Black dice are your baseline, blue dice are more likely to trigger special buffs or debuffs (such as knocking a target down), and red dice have a greater chance of rolling higher damage results.

LIKE CLOCKWORK

The strange timepiece-looking device in the middle of the board is used to track the order of initiative – whose turn it is in combat. It works well in play, but it does feel like it takes up a lot of the board for what it is. A much smaller tracker could probably have achieved the same effect.

SPEED RUN

Exploring areas takes time – if it runs out before you've achieved what you set out to do, bad things happen. You're strongly encouraged to split the party to get everything done, making for some tactical play and a bit of tense guesswork as you try to avoid anyone getting into too much trouble alone.

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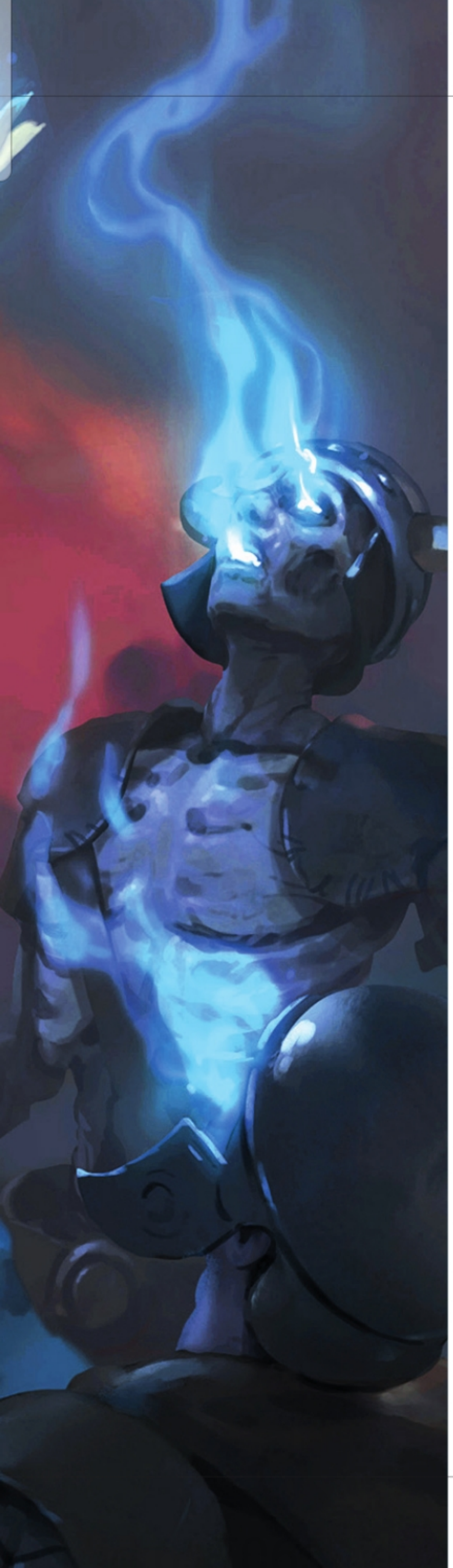

DEVELOPER GRINDING GEAR GAMES • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE • **RELEASE** 2021
pathofexile2.com

Path of Exile 2

Path of Exile gets a major overhaul with this free, upcoming campaign.

When Path of Exile creator Chris Wilson took the stage during ExileCon late last year, I didn't expect him to announce Path of Exile 2, a whole new campaign that overhauls most core systems and upgrades graphics. No extra costs, no divided playerbase, and every core expansion from the original will be re-integrated into the new one.

And after playing 45 minutes of the game, I can't overstate how much it feels like a true sequel, despite technically still being the same game. It's an improvement over the original in nearly every way, and its smart refinement of its skill system makes Path of Exile's daunting complexity a lot more accessible – all without sacrificing an inch of depth. If anything, Path of Exile 2 is going to become even more of a theory crafter's dream come true.

RETURN TO WRAECLAST

Set 20 years after the events of the original campaign, Path of Exile 2 is the story of a society trying to rebuild after the original cast of player characters killed every single god in existence and used their power to murder an even bigger god. Now every deity is dead and humankind is left to clean up the corpses (there are a lot) and try and move forward.

Path of Exile 2, Wilson tells me, is Grinding Gear Games' chance to press the reset button and tell a smaller-scale story that isn't about world-ending threats. You play as an entirely new exile who narrowly escapes their execution and washes up on the shores of Wraeclast again. Though it wasn't immediately clear from the early quests I completed, your goal is to investigate the duke who sentenced you to die and the paranormal mysteries that surround him. Like the original campaign, that means clicking on enemies until they explode and good loot falls out of their dismembered corpses.

Even in the first minutes of this adventure, Path of Exile 2 feels like a big improvement over the original. The original three acts of Path of Exile are now seven years old and their age is shown most in how one-dimensional much of boss fights are. More often than not, you're standing in place clicking on a big monster until it stops moving. And after beating those bosses dozens of times, the lack of challenge is grating. Path of Exile 2's bosses clearly benefit from years of figuring out what makes boss fights fun.

One early quest tasked me with killing The Devourer, a monstrous worm living in an underground passage. Path of Exile's first bosses are usually pretty simple but The Devourer was a surprising challenge. During the battle it would frequently tunnel underground and explode, forcing me to run for my life or die. But I had to be careful, because each time its head moved it would leave behind a pool of acid that I had to avoid, slowly reducing the space I had to manoeuvre, and its deadly tail would crush me if I ventured too close. Meanwhile, the worm's head constantly fired acid projectiles or tried to dismember me with one of its large mandibles. It was hectic and overwhelming – exactly what I love about action-RPGs.

Each of the bosses I fought were exceptionally good at keeping me on my toes and fighting for my life. In a later zone, The Rust King pelted me with jagged bits of metal. If I got nicked even a little bit, I could quickly bleed out. It forced me to pay careful attention to his movement so I knew what type of attack to expect and could prepare. If he levitated a swarm of knives, I had better run to his flanks. If I spent too long hacking away at his ankles, he'd trigger an explosion that would kill me if I didn't step back.

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That high-stakes combat trickles down to regular packs of enemies. Contorted witches spawn occult symbols that explode seconds later, while hulking ghouls slam stone slabs into the ground, sending shockwaves in my direction. I still slaughtered hordes of imps, skeletons, and slimy bugs with reckless abandon, but I also felt far more aware of how they could, in turn, slaughter me.

IMPROVED GRAPHICS

Path of Exile 2's combat benefits greatly from an improved graphics engine as well. Environments in the original were great, but better lighting and particle effects enhance the creepiness and danger of some areas. A zone called Grimtangle is a dark and colourless knot of gnarled branches that would be boring to look at if it weren't for the searing glow of yellow fungi found on the floor. These aren't just pretty to look at, though – venture too close and they'll explode, coating you in acid. What's worse is the zone is full of infected zombies with a special attack that coats the ground in more fungi, forcing me to always be on the move.

One of the cooler features of the new graphics is that arrows are now physical objects that will stick into or bounce off surfaces depending on their material. Though I've never cared for Path of Exile's bows, I now want to use one just so I can coat every level in arrows.

More demanding combat means players will also have to make smarter use of skill gems. Fortunately, this is another area where the game is significantly improved. The skill system in Path of Exile is enormously complicated, but the gist of it is that abilities aren't automatically learned depending on your class. Instead, every ability is a skill gem that can be looted or received as a quest reward and must be socketed into your gear before you can actually use it. If you allocate your stats right, there's nothing to stop a Ranger from throwing fireballs or wielding a two-handed mace and ground-slamming the life out of everything.

Things get more complicated when you start getting gear with linked sockets, letting you equip support gems that augment how your main skill functions. You could cast fireball yourself, or you can socket it with a Spell Totem support gem and summon a stationary totem that fires off an endless stream of fireballs for you. It's a great idea hindered by an unintuitive interface that makes managing and understanding skills troublesome. It's possible to socket skills together that don't actually synergise – and it's not made clear when they don't. But the new system coming in Path of Exile 2 fixes most of these problems while adding even more ways to tinker and build ridiculously powerful monster slayers.

With the new system, armour no longer has randomised sockets, so players don't have to swap skill gems every single time they equip a new piece of gear. Now, each armour type has a set capacity for skill gems, with the skill gems themselves having the actual sockets for support gems. This is all managed in a new inventory menu that makes it much easier to understand how the two interact. With the new system, you can't socket gems that don't work together.

The other exciting feature of this new system is that it's now possible to have more six-linked skill gems. It's hard to explain why this is awesome without diving into a 40-minute lecture on Path of Exile theorycrafting, but the current maximum amount of linked sockets is six, which is extremely rare but creates an astronomically powerful skill. The current system is limited, though, because only a player's chest armour and two-handed weapons are capable of having six sockets. With the new system, any skill gem can have six sockets, so players will now have the possibility of having several six-linked skills rather than just two.

This is in addition to an entire overhaul of equipment. One of the more contentious parts of Path of Exile is that most of the regular equipment looks terrible, with all the coolest cosmetic sets locked behind microtransactions. But Grinding Gear Games is designing dozens of new weapons and armours for players to find that also make use of the new physics and graphics engine.

From my time playing through its first act, it's clear that Path of Exile 2 is a major improvement over an already great game. The new graphics and more demanding combat is a lot of fun, but the reworked skill system goes a long way in sanding down those few remaining jagged edges. And because this isn't a separate sequel, the original campaign will get access to the same core improvements – everything except the better designed bosses and enemies, that is. STEVEN MESSNER PC

Environments are as dark and grim as ever.

Blood, lightning, and gothic furnishings.

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As with the first game, you play as a condemned criminal.

The new areas look significantly nicer.

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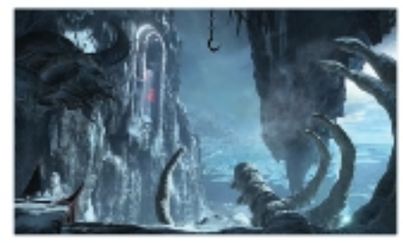

DEVELOPER ID SOFTWARE • **PUBLISHER** BETHESDA SOFTWORKS • **RELEASE** MARCH 20, 2020
doometernal.com

Doom Eternal

An explosion of ultraviolence even more intense than last time.

Playing this FPS sequel is… exhausting. After three hours, I feel like my nervous system needs a vacation. Any good shooter demands something from your reflexes, learning how to aim while dodging incoming fire, but that's just learning how to breathe in Doom Eternal. Properly operating your entire body – and staying alive – is a lot harder.

The game on 'ultraviolence', its version of 'hard' difficulty, is the most stressed I've been playing a game in a long time, because almost every fight has me feeling like I'm on the ragged edge. It's been a couple years since I played any of id Software's 2016 Doom, the surprisingly great reboot that Eternal is following up on, but I don't remember it feeling like this. Doom was fast, rabid, and satisfying in its brutality and the ways it encouraged aggression to stay alive. You had to perform melee 'glory kills' to wrench life-refilling power-ups from enemies, and you'd pull out the chainsaw at key moments to turn an enemy into a geyser of blood and ammo refills. Eternal starts at a level of intensity Doom may only have reached towards the end.

The sequel gives you those basic tools in the first five minutes, and then keeps layering on more for the first three hours. It's overwhelming, but Eternal's goal here is to essentially give you access to superpowers and then force you to learn how to use them instinctively, or you die.

At least on hard, all the enemies except the shambling fodder move fast, are aggressive, and can tear you to pieces in seconds, which means constantly closing range to get melee glory kills that restore your health becomes second nature. But that's hardly enough to keep you alive for long. The biggest source of tension, for me, is remembering to use each of the new cooldown abilities Eternal introduces while also monitoring my weapons, swapping between them as needed.

There's now a grenade you can use to soften up a group of enemies, and later you can swap it out for a cryo grenade that freezes them. Heavier demons have weak spots that the grenade can help you destroy, robbing them of major damage potential or even opening them up for a glory kill. If you don't remember to use the grenade when it's off cooldown, you're probably dead, because Doom Eternal throws a lot of enemies at you at once.

There's a dash move now that you can use twice in a row. If you don't use it constantly you're probably dead, because Doom Eternal's enemies are aggressive, and they're fast. More than once I embarrass myself by missing shotgun blasts at imps as they leap circles around me faster than I can track them.

There's the flame belch, which sets enemies on fire, and while they're on fire you can shoot them to get armour pickups, in the same way glory kills give you health. If you don't remember to use the flame belch constantly, you're definitely dead. That armour is essential.

Then there's your weapons, staples like the shotgun, heavy cannon, and plasma rifle, which each have weapon mods that can save your ass in the right situation. One time I vented the built-up heat from my plasma rifle to blast out a shockwave that saved me from a Hell Knight who was getting ready to knock my head off. I was constantly switching between guns to use whatever was best in the moment, or because I'd just run out of ammo for one and was scrambling to stay alive.

ARMED TO THE TEETH

Within the first three hours I had all of the above, plus the rocket launcher, and I'd been introduced to a handful of other powerup systems. There are

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relics which give you special abilities, like the 'blood punch', which you charge up by performing glory kills. It gives your punch an extra area of effect and deals a lot more damage, so you can One Punch Man your way through a crowd. There's an upgrade system for those relics. There are also suit upgrade points, which can be spent on enhancements like vacuuming power-ups in from further away or lowering cooldowns. And you can upgrade weapon mods, leading to a fully decked-out gun that can then get some kind of final special power boost.

Eternal doesn't hesitate to throw all these systems at you in the first three hours, like a sadistic juggling instructor lobbing live chainsaws at you. It's bold, not the way most big budget videogames would do it, and I admire the chutzpah even if a smoother ramp up would've been more pleasant. You can feel how eager id's designers were to give you everything, rather than slowly re-tell the origin story of becoming Doom Guy.

The few times I came out of fights in Doom Eternal without coming close to dying, I felt really smart. It meant I'd done a good job of dodging and aiming, landing headshots and aggressively using glory kills to keep my health up, but more importantly it meant I'd actually managed to execute something approximating a plan. Like, OK, I'm going to shoot a grenade into the Cacodemon's mouth first, which will let me kill him with a melee finisher, then I'll flamebelch a crowd and pick up as much armour as I can, then switch to the shotgun and keep running forward without stopping to put some distance between me and the mob.

This all happens super fast. It's a mix of instincts and in-the-moment planning, which is what makes Doom Eternal so exhausting – your situational awareness has to be running in overdrive at all times. It's really fun, but absolutely *not* relaxing.

I'm sure on lower difficulty settings Doom Eternal feels a little bit less frantic, but creative director Hugo Martin told me they want people to have the same experience no matter the difficulty setting. Doom Eternal is designed to make you constantly switch weapons and use everything in your arsenal to make it through. The more aggressive enemies push you to use the flame belch to build armour; the weak points on heavy-hitters like the Mancubus and Revenant force you to use grenades or specific weapon mods to cripple them.

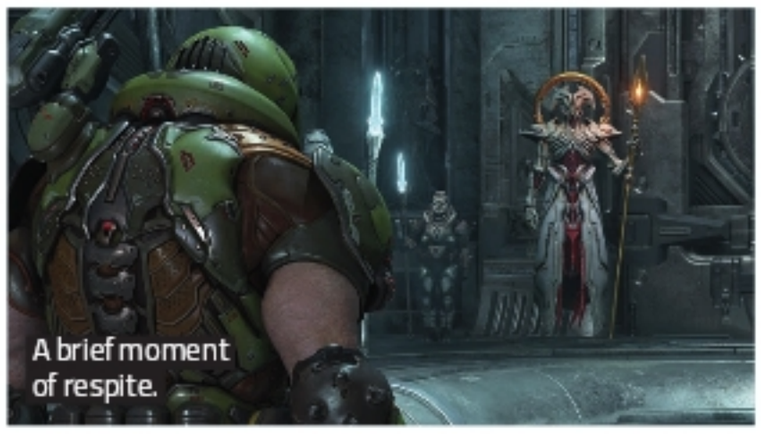
Purely for its combat, Doom feels like it already has a good shot at being the best shooter of 2020. I also saw some really, really cool art design in the first couple hours, with enormous demonic doors and the giant bodies of preserved ancient warriors. This is a Doom game with lore, and it's cool, in a cheesy Dragonforce lyrics kinda way. In a couple hours I met a ghost king, a brooding guy named The Betrayer whose face had definitely seen better days, and used some kind of talisman to unshield the soul of a Hell wizard before pulling his head off with my bare hands.

I was so focused on living through every fight and trying to remember every weapon at my disposal that I didn't even realise, until later, that the essence of '90s Doom was largely absent. Over time Doom's legacy has been distilled down into speed, violence, demons, and shooting. But so much of Doom was actually moody exploration of intricate levels; the spaces you explored made it Doom as much as the guns did.

TOP SECRETS

That level design isn't really on display in the opening hours of Doom Eternal. There are absolutely secrets to be found and side paths to go down, but Eternal is more focused on funnelling you from one intense fight to the next than to more intricate exploration. Towards the end of levels it does give you the ability to fast travel back to earlier rooms, and there are side challenges you'll want to revisit to earn more upgrade points and so on. Hopefully the game settles into a less manic pace as it goes, and makes the act of progressing through complex spaces as integral and rewarding as the combat.

Doom 2016 pulled off that balance beautifully, and Eternal is such a 'more is more' sequel it may end up being lopsided in its focus on the shooting. But if the whole game keeps me on my toes as much as the first three hours, I don't know if I'll mind. As long as my heart can take the sustained stress, anyway. PC WES FENLON



A brief moment of respite.

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It's like *Doom* 2016's last boss had a baby.

Eat chainsaw, mutant spawn of Hell!

Cack on this!

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DEVELOPER OWLCAT GAMES • **PUBLISHER** DEEP SILVER • **RELEASE** TBC
wrath.owlcatgames.com

Pathfinder: Wrath of the Righteous

The CRPG is back with a darker tone and exciting new classes.

It's Tuesday, and demons are invading again. It's the sort of cataclysm you'd expect from a place called 'the Worldwound'. A planar tear to the Abyss has opened up, and now mere mortals must push back against a tide of demonic rage flowing into the dark world of Golarion. Pathfinder: Kingmaker was part of a welcome clutch of new CRPGs to follow Path of Exile's success. Its follow-up, Wrath of the Righteous, is set in a different part of the world, with new heroes and villains, and Owlcat Games promises "a more epic conflict". There won't be a straightforward divide between righteous mortals and furious demons, however. Traitorous mortals are all too happy to sacrifice a few friends for a taste of demonic power, and there are demons among the hordes who are fed up of endless war.

The new Mythic class system lets you occupy this grey area by adopting infernal or divine qualities on top of your original class. You can be a powerful angelic wizard or a demonic oracle, for example. Your shift in either direction is accompanied by appearance changes that will change how you're treated by NPCs.

I actually prefer the sound of the other Mythic classes. You can be one of the most powerful spellcasters in the world if you decide to be a Liche – though you have to be slightly undead to access those powers. The Liche is unlikely to mix well with another Mythic class that Owlcat describes as a kind of fantasy Judge Dredd. They must squash corruption wherever they find it. They can look into a soul and know if it's guilty or not – though they don't always know what a person is guilty of exactly. Finally, my favourite: the Trickster. Tricksters are masterful game players. So masterful, in fact, that they can break the fourth wall and affect dice rolls in your game. Rolled a result of one for a critical miss? Have the Trickster sneakily flip that to a 20 for you. Shhh, don't tell the developers.

CRUSADER KINGS

Kingdom management was a big part of the first game's appeal. The system has been overhauled for the new setting. As the head of a crusade, you are now raising huge armies and deploying them to squish demon incursions. That might not sound as deep as a system that lets you run an entire kingdom, but there is plenty to do. You have to appoint characters to key positions – make sure you have a trustworthy general, and a barely trustworthy chief spy.

You also need to raise armies, secure troops and move those armies to key strategic positions on the world map. If you have a spare force, you can even send armies to distant corners of the world to explore and discover secrets.

I played a fortress assault mission, which involved killing a lot of giant spiders. The darker tone is immediately obvious. I bloodily dispatched giants and archers on the ramparts, unlocking doors that led deeper and deeper into the castle. This combat-heavy section can't show off the game's most promising features however. The new Mythic class paths look great, and Owlcat is determined to do a better job of polishing the sequel to make sure consequences correctly line up with your decisions during the final stages of the game. Time-limited decisions are gone too – apparently players absolutely hated them. Now you will be able to really ponder those difficult moral decisions. Angel or demon? The choice is yours. TOM SENIOR PC

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The developer promises huge-scale battles.

Gunpowder exists in this world.

Hunt animals and use the skins for crafting.

DEVELOPER AMAZON GAME STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE • **RELEASE** MAY 26
newworld.com

New World

Amazon's attempts a new approach to massively multiplayer.

Yes, retailer Amazon is getting into development, kicking things off with an MMORPG. Set in the 17th century during "the twilight of the Age of Exploration", the game mixes aspects of real-world history with fantasy, with thousands of players battling and working together to make a home on the dangerous, monster-ridden island of Aeternum.

The idea of an MMO feels almost old-fashioned in this age of shared-world shooters and battle royales, so I ask director Scot Lane from Amazon Game Studios why he thinks now is the right time to bring this genre back to life.

"Well, it sounded cool," he says. "But also because MMO development has slowed down. It's kind of interesting when everyone goes in one direction and you go in a different direction, right? We didn't want to follow. We also wanted to create a world that players can really get lost in. That, to me, is one of the top goals for this game. We want something you can play with friends, uncover mysteries, experience a world. I personally love playing MMOs because I can disappear into the fiction."

So how will players actually interact in New World? I ask Lane for examples of activities the game will offer, both large and small. "We have these massive battles," he says. "50 on 50, protecting forts, attacking them, warring over territory. The world hits back too. The monsters don't want you here and as you start to move in, they will push back.

"They invade your territory. Slowly at first, but then more quickly, and you have to step in and defend your land. Hundreds of AI will move in and try and take over your territory, which creates some cool social experiences."

But Lane says there will be less dramatic things to do in New World too, including owning a house that you can decorate and invite players into. And if you're the type of player who prefers adventuring alone, or playing with small groups, Lane says the game will have you covered as well. "We call that 'alone in a crowd' and a lot of MMO players are like that," he says. "They just want to play by themselves, but like knowing there are other people around, who they can maybe ask for help if they're struggling. We've actually put mechanics in to make it easier to get help if you're in trouble.

"We've also put a lot of quests in that cater to the single player, to the PvE player. And when I talked earlier about the AI trying to take back territory, some of this has been set up so that a single player can get involved. One person can make a difference in the world, which is really important to us."

SWORD SWINGING

Combat is something Lane thinks will set New World apart from other games in the genre. "Most MMOs have a mouse cursor," he says. "You tab to highlight a target, then you manage cooldowns and percentages. That's cool, and I play those games. But our take is bringing action RPG combat in. It's physical-based. When I swing my sword, it has collision. My position in the world matters. I have to be the right distance from you. And every player has collision, so spacing matters.

"It's a different kind of skill-based combat. It's more visceral, more responsive. In a lot of MMOs, if someone's five levels ahead of you, you have no chance of defeating them. But in our game there is a chance. Levels absolutely give you power, but people who are good at action games will still have a shot."

After something of a lull for the genre, it's nice to see someone making a new MMO. But do people still have an appetite for them? I guess we'll find out next year. ANDY KELLY PC

DEVELOPER FLASHBACK GAMES • **PUBLISHER** SLITHERINE LTD • **RELEASE** MARCH 19
slitherine.com/game/panzer-corps-2

Panzer Corps 2

A wargame that recognises we all make mistakes.

Sometimes all a game really needs is a good Undo button. Wargames can be intricate things, full of edge-case rules and surprising mechanics – how do bridges work, again? Can this unit attack after moving? The complications are myriad. The power to take back an accidental click, avoid a misunderstood mechanic, or dodge a dodgy combat resolution is powerful. Euphoric, even. Friends, I write here today to say that Panzer Corps 2 has a really good undo button. I recently got to sit down with a preview build of the game, courtesy of developers Flashback Games and publishers Slitherine, and I found the ability to take-backsies my way to victory not just useful, but thrilling. No amount of do-overs can make up for bad strategy, but mistakes get made – sometimes five moves ago – and the developers of Panzer Corps 2 get that.

The upcoming sequel to 2011's Panzer Corps, which is itself a re-imagining of classic wargame series Panzer General. Panzer Corps 2 continues that tradition, laying out a pretty fine-grained wargame that cares about small details, such as the difference between a Panzer IIIF and a Panzer IV Ausf D.

In its core combat, and the way a battle plays out, it stays true to the spirit of those earlier games. The biggest change for the second game in the series are the graphics, a leap from pixels and sprites to Unreal-powered 3D loveliness. It's a welcome upgrade, and the detail-oriented, realistic art-style looks good in motion. The interface isn't quite as nice – blocky and obtrusive – though it's definitely better than most wargame fare.

Unlike many other operational-level World War II games, Panzer Corps 2 lets the player build their army from the ground up. You start with picking a leader and their specialties. Mine, for example, was able to field more tanks and had trained their armoured divisions to overrun the enemy – but had a downside in refusing to field overstrength units. Regardless of specialty it's down to you to pick how many infantry divisions, or tanks, or planes you're going to field, and of what kind. The army units you choose stay with you from campaign to campaign, accruing veterancy, and you can upgrade their equipment as new tanks or transports become available.

ARMY MEN

Your army is limited by a total size, with units taking up varying amounts of slots – a single slot for a unit of bridge engineers, five or more for super-heavy railway artillery. You also generate a currency called 'prestige' as you take objectives and finish missions, and that's spent not only to get new units while deploying, but to reinforce existing units or bring in new units mid-operation. (You can also spend a premium for veteran reinforcements, which is a nice touch.)

The preview I played had me helm the invasions of Poland, Norway, and France. (In that order. A little odd, but okay. It's a preview.) Carrying a personalised army from map to map was a great touch, and the units felt like mine in a real, personal way that they don't often feel in wargames at this scale. I had picked each unit out of a large lineup, used it through multiple battles, and chosen specific heroes to accompany it.

By the end of the rather short campaign I had treasured veteran units, and my army makeup was remarkably different from the one a purely historical wargame would have provided. Other games may have simpler mechanics, or at least more elegant ones, but Panzer Corps 2 is delivers the experience of being a general like little else. JON BOLDING PC

War, eh? Did anyone ever find out what it is good for?

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Lots of tanks to choose from.

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DEVELOPER TUQUE STUDIO • **PUBLISHER** WIZARDS OF THE COAST • **RELEASE** 2020
darkalliance.com

Dark Alliance

Hack and slash your way across Icewind Dale with some mates.

Baldur's Gate isn't the only D&D setting being revisited soon. The previously console-exclusive action-RPG series Dark Alliance is also returning, and this time the party – which now includes D&D celebrity Drizzt Do'Urden – is hanging out in the chilly, barbarian-infested land of Icewind Dale, trying to keep the frost giant population down.

The original Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance launched on consoles soon after Baldur's Gate 2 concluded with the Throne of Bhaal expansion, but aside from sharing the same setting it was an entirely different kind of fantasy romp. It was a 3D hack-and-slash affair with three classes, couch co-op, and a linear, rollicking campaign that left countless dead monsters in its wake.

Next year's Dark Alliance drops 'Baldur's Gate' from the title and takes the action north. Icewind Dale was the setting of a pair of great Infinity Engine RPGs, but it's also famously the stomping grounds of the rebellious Drow hero, Drizzt Do'Urden, originally created by author R.A. Salvatore. You'll be playing him, along with his pals, Cattie-Brie, Bruenor, and Wulfgar.

Drizzt and his buds' adventures have spanned several series, starting with The Crystal Shard, but Dark Alliance is a standalone romp. "It's a new, unique adventure inspired by the characters, but it is set in and around the events of The Crystal Shard," says Jeff Hattem, head of Tuque Studio. "But some of the elements … will be familiar to fans of the franchise."

All four adventurers will be playable together in co-op, both online and offline with split-screen. It's been convenient for Tuque to have such well-defined characters who have not only been developed across a multitude of books, but also already comfortably fit into RPG classes and playstyles. The studio doesn't want to be strict about the class definitions of these characters, however, because they evolved over time and it wants players to have a similar experience.

The adventuring quartet still falls into familiar archetypes, however. "Drizzt is very dashy, quick and agile," says Hattem. "Wulfgar is the basher – he's a seven-foot-tall, strong barbarian. Cattie-Brie is more of a ranged character, where she has a wide range of different abilities that she can use from a distance, and she's super athletic. And there's Bruenor, the father figure of the group and the protector. Using gaming terminology, he's the tank."

LEVEL UP

Dark Alliance has a hub-and-spoke design where the heroes will hang out in a central location where they can pick up quests and go off on side adventures. There's a main quest to follow, though it's still a mystery, and you won't have complete freedom over your path, but you'll still have options for how you progress.

This also goes for building your character, picking skills and gear, and creating different loadouts. The skills and abilities that will be making their way over from the tabletop game aren't ready to be revealed yet, unfortunately. There will be a degree of self-expression, however, from the choices you make when you level up, to the appearance of your gear, which is cosmetic as well as practical.

This is how Dark Alliance approaches roleplaying, rather than through lots of dialogue choices and story-based character development. There's still some exploration and downtime, but the main focus of the game is action. Specifically, chopping up monsters.

"D&D is super fun and it offers lots of different ways to please different kinds of players," says Hattem. "Our game is the part when the DM says 'roll initiative', and that's when you get going." FRASER BROWN PC

If we don't fight that dragon, I'll eat my helmet.

Flame on.

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Like most dual-wielders, Drizzt is a bit of a show off.

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DEVELOPER BLIZZARD • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE • **RELEASE** TBC
diablo.blizzard.com

Diablo IV

The clickfest returns, grimier and more online than ever.

Diablo IV's crypts are more hateful than Diablo III's. They're darker and dustier with Bloody Piles that explode like popped blisters in slow-mo. It's also shinier, but in a dour way. Lightning shimmers across wet stone and fleshy creatures, and it sometimes rains, dynamically generating muddy puddles. Path of Exile feels cheerful by comparison.

I'm hesitant to draw any big conclusions about Diablo IV because I imagine it'll be quite different whenever it releases, and Blizzard says that probably won't be soon.

The demo was quite easy, for one thing. I'd guess Blizzard didn't want players getting frustrated, especially those who had to stand in a long line at BlizzCon, so they outfitted us with strong characters. I played the 20-minute demo twice, once as the Druid and once as the Sorceress. In the latter run I was chewing through heavy enemies like the Drowned Juggernauts – big boys who slam down splash damage attacks – without much worry. My mouse-bound abilities, a little ice projectile and a bigger fire projectile, were more than enough to freeze or fry any slippery demons I encountered, so I only played with her hotkey abilities to spice things up. I used a health potion just once and I didn't really need to.

Because Diablo IV is a ways off I'd expect things like ability cooldown times and damage numbers to be tweaked as development continues. I'll focus more on the broader topics, then: the new art and engine, and the Destiny 2-like open world.

The art we've seen so far is certainly as gloomy as was pitched during the BlizzCon reveal. The piles of skulls remind me of pencil doodles I'd do in high school, where I'd get the thinnest mechanical lead I could and try to draw hyper-ornate horror frescos. There's a choking haze over everything and the way the irregular stone walls glisten make the world feel unbearably damp. The boss in the demo, Merinth of the Deep, reminds me of a Remnant: From the Ashes boss. She's a giant, shiny, jiggly drowned witch whose flesh lunges around after her as she swings a nasty, toothed mace and summons puke pools.

But while Diablo IV is far less of a laser show than Diablo III, I'm not sure it'll totally satisfy Diablo II diehards when it comes to 'darkness'. When I think about Diablo II I tend to forget just how ugly and clunky it was. The darkness and the 4:3 aspect ratio meant that you couldn't see more than a few feet in any direction, and movement was mechanical. Diablo IV ditches the Warcraft-like cleanliness of Diablo III's art, but is still full of friendly quality-of-life features and modern slickness. You can dash-dodge. Animations cleanly blend together. Enemies are outlined in red when you mouse-over them, and have health bars, and damage numbers pop off of them. You've got a convenient quest tracker and minimap which guides you to waypoints you select. In a literal sense Diablo IV is not as dark as Diablo II. There's more ambient light, more indicators and particle effects popping off all the time. It isn't a total reversion to Diablo II's grimy simplicity.

DEMON DAYS

Another case in point: Diablo IV is an open world big enough to warrant rideable horses, and whether or not you choose to party up for co-op, it won't just be your world. It's a seamless multiplayer experience now, and no, there's no offline mode. While walking to a quest marker I ran into two other players at BlizzCon. They fought alongside me for a little bit, silently. During a moment of commotion while I zapped a horde of nasties, they ran ahead and I never saw them again.

One of the concerns discussed during

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a group interview I attended was the challenge of balancing the sense of desolation Diablo's landscapes are meant to evoke and the presence of random other players. As part of that thinking they don't want multiplayer world bosses to require too many players.

I'm left wondering if these two ideas can really coexist. The world felt pretty desolate until I saw other players bolting around the first town I encountered and then running toward the same boss I was. When I encountered that boss – the jelly-filled Merinth – I thought about how they'd already slain her in their timeline. I thought of World of Warcraft and of Disneyland. There's no queuing or anything, but seeing players who are clearly on the same quest, but aren't a permanent part of my world, reminds me that this isn't just my adventure in a way Diablo II's multiplayer didn't.

Because the overworld is shared, there are no game-wide difficulty settings. Enemies will scale for each player, but they won't necessarily scale to your level – some parts of the world will be scarier than others. Dungeons, however, will be private to you and your party and will have their own difficulty options, which I'm told will be exceptionally granular. Places important to the campaign will also be private to you and your party when you first enter them, though other players may show up in them later as the world changes over the course of your journey. At least we won't be running into Goku420VapeGod69nice and squad while chasing a dramatic narrative event.

Aside from running into other players, the explosions of loot are another reminder that I'm chasing numbers in a compulsive loop, but maybe I'm immunised to their mood-breaking effect after playing so much Diablo II and III. Legendary items were plentiful in the demo and had the silly names I expected. The Sheltering Highland Trousers of Grounding gave me +6 damage reduction and the Stone of Jordan is a ring that gave me +1 Rank to all equipped skills.

Visual character customisation is new to the series, but we got preset characters for the demo with two looks and a few abilities chosen for us. For the Sorceress I had the Frostbolt and Fireball abilities I mentioned bound to the mouse buttons, plus Blizzard for AOE damage and slowdown, Lightning Spear which bounces a bolt around, Meteor for a high-damage AOE attack that has to be timed just right, and Conduit, which turned me into a supersonic lightning god who takes no damage and zaps around the map killing things just by existing.

I had fun dodging ranged attacks and targeting big globs of beasts with Meteor and Blizzard, catching them bunching up like a kid's soccer team. Lightning Spear was a fire and forget type of ability that bored me. Turning into 'lightning incarnate' with Conduit was fun for showing off to the two players I encountered on the road.

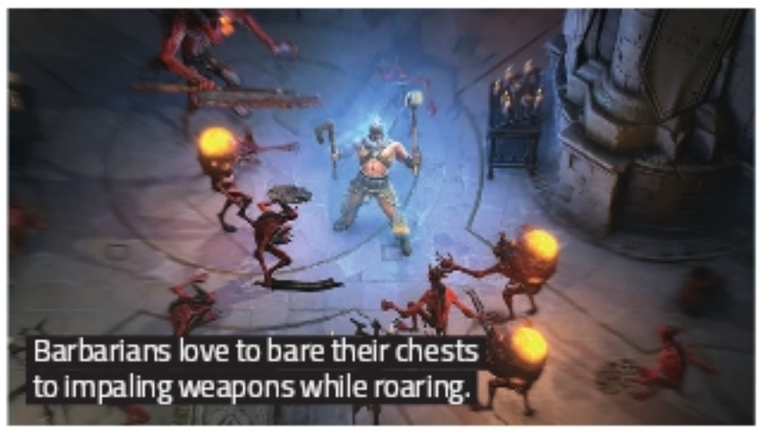
The Druid, who returns from Diablo II, was more fun. His mouse-bound abilities temporarily transform him into a werewolf or werebear as he attacks and the latter slams his paws into the ground to gore big lumps of enemies (it's kind of cute, in a bloody way). I was a little disappointed there's no grotesque transformation sequences – it's basically instant – but I like how huge the bear form feels.

INFERNAL AFFAIRS

Diablo IV is the embodiment of the phrase 'we've heard your feedback', but with some concessions for modernity, in that it's an always-online game again (hopefully without Error 37) and answers about in-game monetisation have been vague. There'll be expansions, and beyond that, they say they "won't sell power".

Otherwise, though, everything that kicked off disgruntled forum threads when Diablo III released has been addressed to varying degrees. There are currently no plans for the same kind of auction house Diablo III launched with. There'll be guilds and player trading. PvP was planned from the start. The art is nasty and serious.

Pulling off a modern, Destiny 2-like shared world while also satisfying nostalgia for a much simpler 20-year-old game won't be easy. Already some fans are rankled by the mandatory online. But if encounters with other players are meaningful, and don't intrude too heavily on Lilith's blood-soaked return to Sanctuary, it may not sour the mood in the end. TYLER WILDE PC



Barbarians love to bare their chests to impaling weapons while roaring.

World bosses will require multiple players to defeat.

act_id:65706547

The characters announced so far are the Barbarian, Sorceress, and Druid.

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Sylvanas Windrunner, lost in the shadows.

DEVELOPER BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE • **RELEASE** 2020
www.worldofwarcraft.com

World of Warcraft: Shadowlands

What you can expect from this dark new chapter.

This is the eighth major expansion for World of Warcraft and it's the most dramatic since Cataclysm tore the world apart. Sylvanas Windrunner has pierced the veil between Azeroth and the realm of the dead, granting players access to the titular Shadowlands: an eerie afterlife featuring five brand new zones to explore.

One of the biggest changes in Shadowlands can be found in the levelling system. When they enter the Shadowlands max level players will be dropped from level 120 to 50, and work towards the new level cap of 60. The idea is to make levels feel meaningful again.

"I don't think we did a great job between levels 110 and 120," admits Patrick Dawson, production director. "It felt like you were getting weaker every time, like you weren't gaining enough new talents and abilities. But the journey from 50 to 60 in Shadowlands will feel a lot better. You'll really feel like you're becoming more powerful."

Shadowlands is also making a fun change to the Death Knight class, opening it up to all existing races. If you've always wanted to roll a Pandaren version of Arthas, or a tiny evil fox man lord of evil, your dreams have come true. The expansion will also offer new customisation options for characters, to help make your hero stand out, and a new infinite dungeon called Torghast.

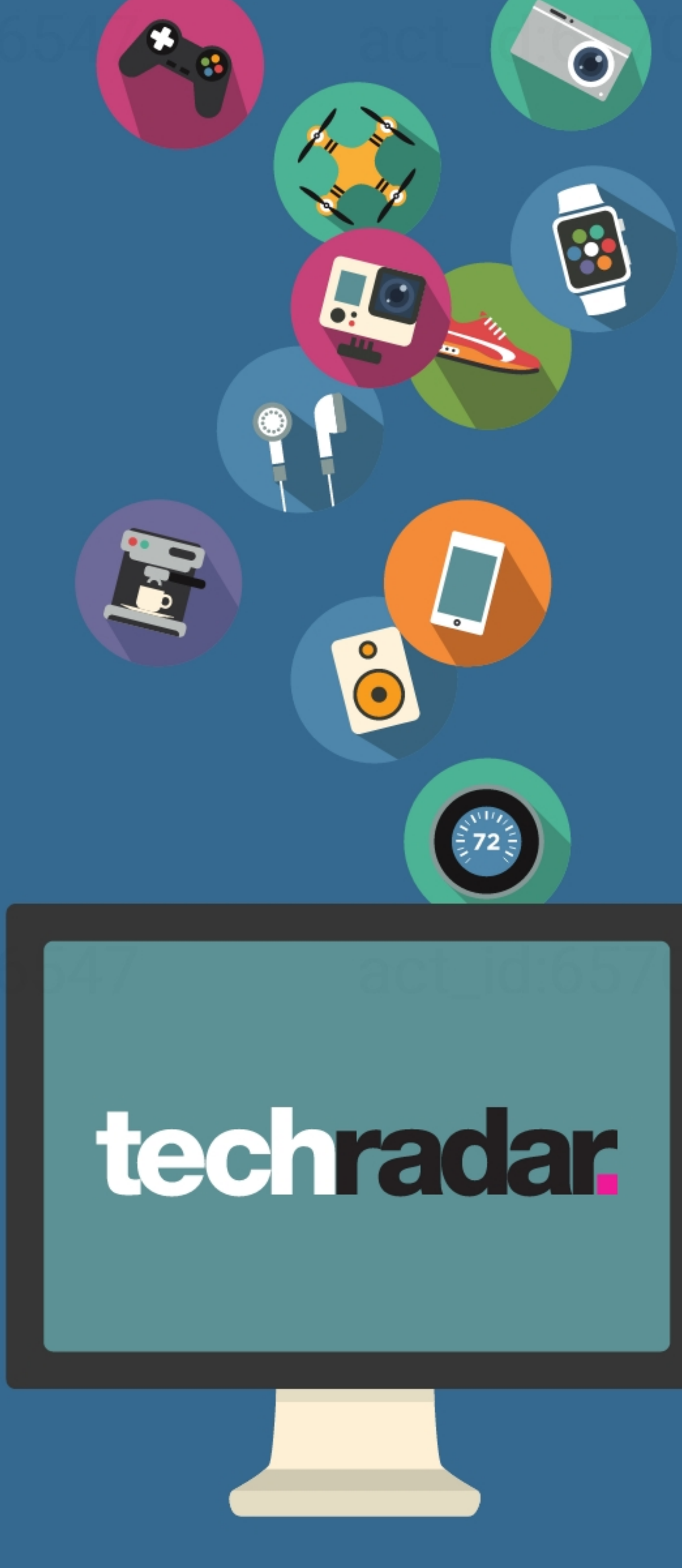
Known as the Tower of the Damned, Torghast is an otherworldly prison where the most dangerous, terrible souls in the universe are locked away. This sinister place will feature some of Shadowlands' toughest trials, but delving into its depths will be worth the risk.

"You can go in there and get runes which can then be used to create Legendary items," says level designer Sarah Verrell. "You take the runes you find to a runeforge and you get to choose which stats and abilities they have. You can create some really powerful items."

SECTS EDUCATION

Covenants are another new feature. You'll have to align yourself with one of several mysterious sects, each with their own plans for how to harness the power of the Shadowlands. Pick one and you'll gain access to their sanctum, a place where you can pick up unique quests. Your covenant will also grant you new abilities.

As for the new zones, these include Bastion, which features gleaming spires and sweeping vistas, and Revendreth, a gloomy gothic village dominated by a looming keep. This is one of the darkest World of Warcraft expansions yet and also one of the most unique – it looks full of good reasons to return to Azeroth. ANDY KELLY PC



The home of technology

techradar.com

DEVELOPER FIRST WATCH GAMES • **PUBLISHER** HI-REZ STUDIOS • **RELEASE** 2020
roguecompany.com

Rogue Company

Coming out with all guns blazing.

Jumping out of a hoverplane with the rest of my four-person crew, I cast an eye across Rogue Company's industrial canal map. I can see the opposing team in the sky, their red contrails giving me some basic information on where they'll make landfall.

Rogue Company is Hi-Rez's third-person multiplayer shooter. I'm playing the 4v4 Extraction mode where you earn victory from hacking an objective, counter-hacking an objective, or – because this is a shooter – mowing down every one of the opposing team and forcing them to sit through a replay of your winning kill.

You start the game with a secondary weapon and some loose change – enough for a grenade of some kind, or maybe an upgrade to that secondary weapon. As each round begins you'll get to use the shop again, spending the cash you've earned through wins, successful revives of teammates and so. It's CSGO-ish but the class-based twist means items and perks differ from mercenary to mercenary rather than being the same for everyone.

I upgraded my pistol before jumping out of the plane, so I need to pick a landing point. While I'm airborne the game uses a blue grid to mark the play area and glowing triangles for the starting points of the three main routes through the map. I think the enemy team mostly headed to the right so I swoop left. I'm hoping to buy time to learn the layout a little before the firefighting begins in earnest.

I really want to tell you that this approach went perfectly to plan. That nobody got flanked. That nobody forgot they had bought a smoke grenade. That they absolutely remembered to use their character's special ability which lets them revive themselves. That they definitely didn't die behind a shipping container. That they definitely equipped their primary weapon once they bought it. That… Actually, none of you were there so you can't fact check what happened – everything went to plan!

BRING ALL YOUR WEAPONS

While everything went to plan my growing map familiarity started to pay off. Flanking routes stopped catching me out, and I started deploying gadgets like tripmines with more finesse, making it easier to protect certain areas or to force the enemy to change route. I was also delighted by the hotkey for swapping between right and left shoulder view.

Despite some gadgetry and the character abilities Rogue Company (or at least the 4v4 Extraction mode and the 2v2 Wingman mode) prioritises shooting. Map knowledge and shop purchases can give you an edge but ultimately you're a person with a gun, in a world of people with guns, solving people-with-gun problems by being more competent at guns. PHILIPPA WARR PC

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THE
MOST FUN
YOU CAN
HAVE WITH
YOUR HANDS
WITHOUT
GOING
BLIND

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FULL AUTO

Meeting the excitable team behind auto-battler spin-off **DOTA UNDERLORDS**.

By Jon Bolding

Sequestered well away from other game teams at Valve, the 30-odd people making *Dota Underlords* are having a lot of fun. They're loud and competitive, playing instruments on breaks from coding and jumping at the chance to down tools and just play their game for a while. After a year of growth and work, they're preparing to release season one of *Underlords* this month – February 25. I visited the team, talked about their development, and got a look at what's new in the game's 1.0 version. What really struck me is that, approaching release, they're still in love with their game in a way unlike many other teams I've spoken to in games development. Even in a studio with a healthy work environment, one that doesn't crunch, the time before release is still fraught and stressful. The *Underlords* team seems to just want to keep making *Underlords*.

Dota Underlords is a standalone spinoff from the main game. It's inspired by a mod, *Dota Auto Chess*, that has gone on to spawn a whole new genre. A simple hook makes the hero-drafting gameplay of the new auto-battlers almost like a kind of strategic slot machine, fun both sitting at a desktop and on mobile. They're colourful games, forcing you to stay on your toes, but still offering downtime between rounds. Brad Muir, coder and designer on *Underlords*, feels just that way about it. "I'll go to the bathroom at round 12 and 13," he says, to laughter from his teammates. "Whatever, it's fine, I'm doing fine, I can just skip out on it and it's OK."

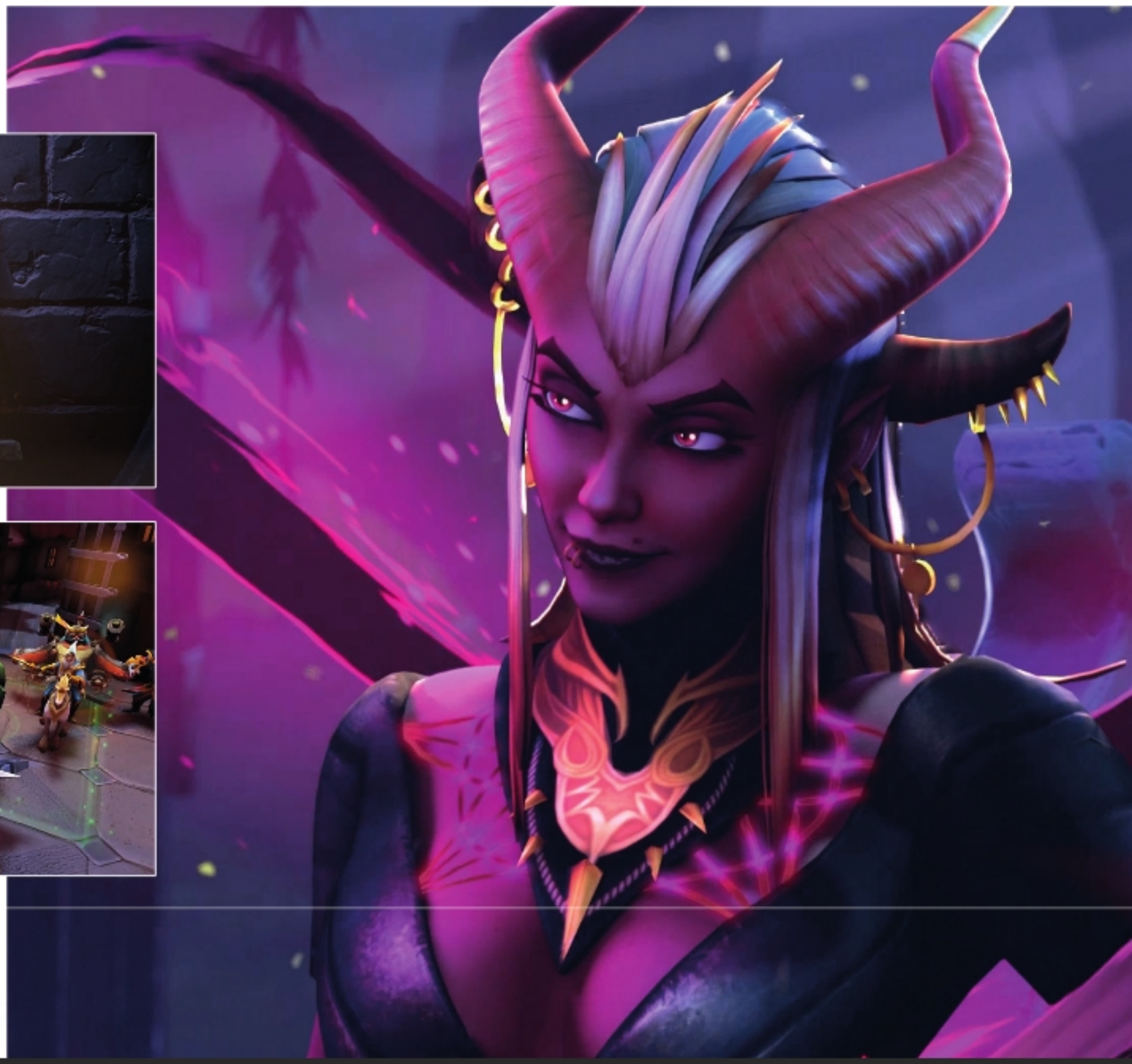
For a studio that makes notoriously innovative games, making a spinoff from *Dota 2*, what is perhaps the most complex competitive game in the world today, Muir's attitude came as a surprise. But I shouldn't have been surprised. There's a lot that's unusual about *Dota Underlords*.

THE GAME THAT DOTA MADE

Valve is a company with a long-established method for choosing what games to make: if they see a good mod, they find a way to make it into a game. This is sincerely no exaggeration: *Team Fortress*, *Counter-Strike*, *Garry's Mod*, *Ricochet*, *The Ship*, *Day of Defeat*, *Alien Swarm*, and *Dota 2* all started as mods before becoming games either made or published by Valve.

So it should come as no surprise that Valve took notice when, in early 2019, a quirky custom mode for *Dota 2* was one of the most popular games in the world. In a flash, *Dota Auto Chess* had become the most popular *Dota* custom game ever made. Brad Muir reckons that from the numbers it was clear to Valve there was something going on. "It was really an outlier," he says, "Wow... yeah. There has to be something here." But It wasn't clear to everyone playing it what *Dota Auto Chess* was. It had an element of character-collecting RPGs to it, a flair for the random cribbed from gacha mobile games, but still very distinctly in the hero-driven strategy of the MOBA space. If you've

MUCH OF THE AUTO-BATTLER STRATEGY IS ABOUT TEAM COMPOSITION



RIGHT: Late game battlefields become as complex as any MOBA teamfight.

BELOW: Your Underlord of choice joins your minions on the battlefield.

FIRST FIRST LOOK

The early origins of Underlords

This is what the game looked like in February 2019 – the first working prototype that would become *Dota Underlords*. Even as it launched into a public beta, *Underlords* had no fully defined aesthetic principles. The finished game takes Valve's *Dota* aesthetics to new levels – quite literally. The varied environments of the city of Whitespire are compact, detailed, and aesthetically pleasing in motion.

played enough of them, it's clear the MOBA genre – itself spawned by the original mod *DOTA* – has given birth in turn. *Dota Auto Chess* was the first distinct game in what we now call a new genre: the auto-battler.

AUTO-BATTLER 101

In an auto-battler, players draft a team of characters from a shared pool, collecting multiple copies of the same character to increase the overall power of that specific character. Characters with similar traits form alliances, and these alliances give new powers to your team. Building a team is only half the game, but it's the half you have control over.

Each round of the game you're matched up against a random opponent and your team automatically fights the other team in real time – like a MOBA teamfight – and the only bearing you have on this is giving each unit a starting position on the board.

Much of auto-battler strategy is about team composition and hoping for a lucky draw from the hero pool while you're drafting. For example, combining tough knights with versatile healers in *Underlords* gives your team a strong front line that can sustain against heavy punishment from the enemy – but might suffer against the burst damage and mobility of enemy assassins.

That's OK, though, because the truly compelling thing about autobattlers is that they're fast-paced. If you lose, well, maybe next time you'll get better draws, or your automated combatants will pick better enemy targets. They're perfect for relaxed gaming and mobile sessions – so perfect, in fact, that the developers on the *Underlords* team were motivated to get the Source 2 engine working on mobile devices.

The auto-battler is a genre that is so new that the name doesn't even have a standard grammar. Auto-battler, auto battler, and autobattler

» are all common. Valve's Steam page for *Dota Underlords* doesn't even use the term, instead calling the game a "strategy battler".

FLAT OUT

If you don't already know, Valve has a self-organising, flat company structure. Employees choose where and on what team to work, and there are no titles like 'team head' or 'lead designer' on anyone's desk.

The team naturally coalesces around the project. If a project doesn't have enough momentum with a group to happen then it doesn't happen at all. *Dota Underlords* certainly has momentum. "Ultimately, a bunch of people here

CRAWL SPACE

Missions in the new City Crawl mode

1 Street Fights are short battles against an AI opponent, taking an existing army and seeing if you can figure out how to deploy it to best gain victory.

2 Objectives send you into the Knockout or Standard game modes, either against humans or the AI, to try and get a particular achievement.

3 Puzzles are open-ended challenges whereyou build an army to defeat an enemy setup. They tickle the part of my brain that loves to beat the system.

LEFT: *Underlords'* slick UI clues you in to important information, like which heroes are upgrades or allies.

BOTTOM: Jull is a walrus man who is also a bootlegger. Character of the year.

were playing *Auto Chess* a lot," says Lawrence Yang, a UX specialist who became a designer on *Underlords*.

Another developer interjects, "We played... a lot of the game," says Adrian Finol. Finol has been with Valve since the *Half-Life 2* days, he's a game designer and programmer. "And it's Valve, right?" he says, "so we looked at the numbers, and we looked at the desire of making it here, how many people wanted to work on it." And that was it. There were enough people interested in working on *Underlords*, so off to the races it went. Valve initially approached the *Dota Auto Chess* modders, the China-based Drodo Studio, for a collaboration. The two studios ultimately had different visions for the design of the game, and amicably decided to go their separate ways.

Which meant there was now definitely an internal Valve team making what would become *Dota Underlords*. From six people the team slowly grew to its current size of about 30. Engineers laid the first framework of the game, then designers started to iterate on the mechanics, UX joined, interface designers, then artists and modellers. The final team was fun-loving and loud, an ethos that shows in *Underlords* itself. It has a comedy to it, something that *Dota 2* has, but amplified.

The team has really embraced a design philosophy of customisation for the players, trying out new things in the process. And that's not something which is very easy in a brand new game genre.

That's not to say it was all perfect. A vocal community of millions had formed around the new genre, and the decision to involve that community with their development would make turmoil for the team. Further, Valve was still shadowed by the high-profile failure of card game *Artifact*, the prior *Dota 2* spinoff.

A VOCAL COMMUNITY OF MILLIONS HAD FORMED AROUND THE NEW GENRE

LORDING IT UP

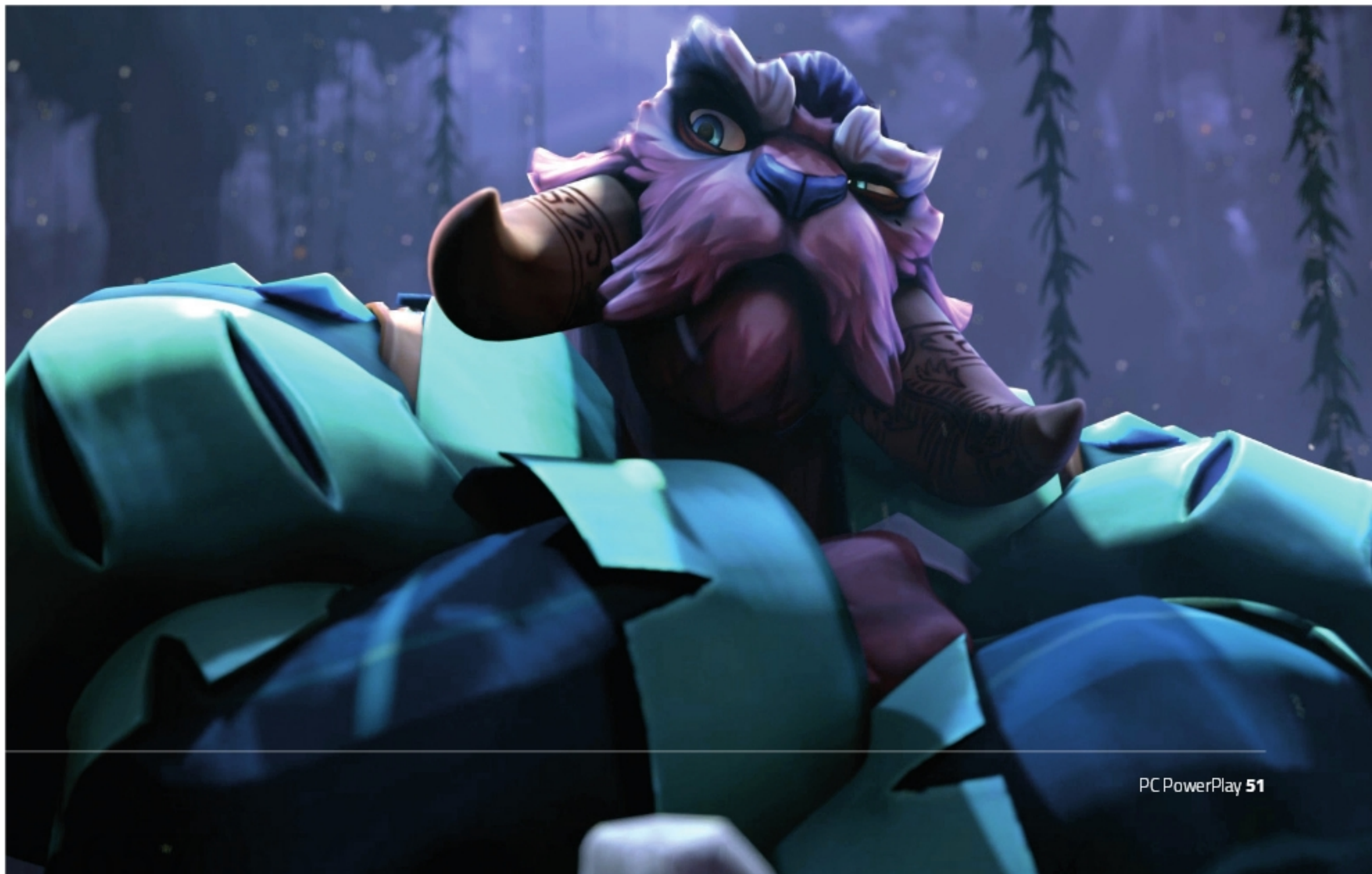
Making a game in a genre that nobody really understands yet isn't easy. *Underlords* officially had a development team in February 2019, just about a month after the new genre had a name. Adrian Finol was cautiously optimistic about the challenge. "I wouldn't say it was scary," says Finol. "More like, you know, uncharted."

"I would say the word scary," says Muir, laughing, "I would say that." It wasn't an unreasonable fear. *Dota Auto Chess* had some 8.5 million downloads to its name, a number bigger than most full game releases.

There was clearly some magic, but no single designer could perfectly encapsulate it. "What is it?" says Muir. "Is it like, this perfect thing, and if you start tinkering
with it it's gonna all come crashing down? Is it a house of cards? Or is it a solid foundation that's resilient that you can build on? We didn't know. Until we started pulling the Jenga pieces out."

So the team went to work, trying to figure out what was essential to the game and what they could do without. What they could twist, or change, or add. What was the nascent genre missing? What was everyone enjoying so much about it, and how could that be amplified? The vision for *Underlords* called for a more complex and strategic autobattler than had yet been made, one that gave players more control over their fate rather than relying on random item drop chances or lucky draws from the draft pool to determine victory.

The team was empowered to try new prototypes, new concepts, and new formats. Internally, Valve seems to prize and focuses on attempting radical changes to the established concepts of a game.



Underlords was tested with five character teams, rather than ten, which turned out to be boring and felt restrictive. However, testing that concept later gave rise to the fast-playing Knockout mode, which starts players off with five pieces on the board and has them grow from there. Knockout has proven pretty popular with players, but it wasn't always like that. "Honestly, the first Knockout playtest was terrible," says Muir. Bad enough that he wasn't excited for the second one... where the new mechanics suddenly really clicked for the team.

Yang is clear about the benefits of prototyping and the freedom to try new things, which he attributes to Valve's structure. "Scary or liberating or anything, all the teams at Valve, we're not really beholden to upper management or anything to make any of these decisions," he says. "So all the teams are doing their best to make a fun game, and making the best decisions to make customers happy, so from that perspective it's exactly like all the other teams at Valve and all the other games that we've made. It just so happens that this time it's a completely new genre. So there are a lot more unknowns."

There was, however, a key difference from past Valve games. After it released into beta in June 2019, *Dota Underlords* would be developed actively, in the public eye, in full conversation with its community, as no Valve game before it had ever been.

VALVE TIME

Valve is notorious for not delivering things when promised. 'Valve Time' is a running gag for gamers of a certain generation, a warped place where *Team Fortress 2*'s 1999 release date can silently stretch all the way to 2007 and involve a complete redesign.

Dota Underlords was not developed on Valve Time. *Dota Underlords* was developed in real time. "I think we finally killed Valve Time," says Finol. The *Underlords* beta featured a prominent feedback button that went right to the team's inboxes. Finol explained why this particular game got the public treatment. "I think it was mostly from how fast we were building it. We knew that we were moving fast, because we were excited to work on it, and we wanted to get it out. I think at the end of the day it ended clear that we cannot develop this on our own. We need a bunch of people on our side to tell us how they are going to play this game." That feedback was crucial. Muir's fears about pulling Jenga pieces from the game design could be allayed by the massed experience of the players, many of whom had already played hundreds of hours in *Dota Auto Chess*.

The constant dialogue with players over new features added to the game took Valve's private prototype development public. The fans got to see the ups and downs of game design, like when a fix seems perfect but goes wrong. A persistent problem with auto-battlers is that an unchanging roster of characters gets stale quickly. The Jail was developed to counteract that: every day a few characters get thrown in and aren't available. The developers and community loved the idea. Once implemented, it was chaotic. A day was too little time to quickly grasp how the new mix of characters worked, or worse, the randomly chosen removals for that day caused chaotically overpowered combos to emerge in the absence of their counters. The jail, once everyone's favourite idea, was gone within two months.

User feedback was also a burden, at times. It was hard to try riskier changes because of the chance that a lot of the player base would react poorly – and energy was spent managing upset players when it would have been better spent developing the game.

THE JAIL, ONCE EVERYONE'S FAVOURITE IDEA, WAS GONE WITHIN TWO MONTHS

RIGHT: The Underlords' ultimate abilities often make or break a fight.

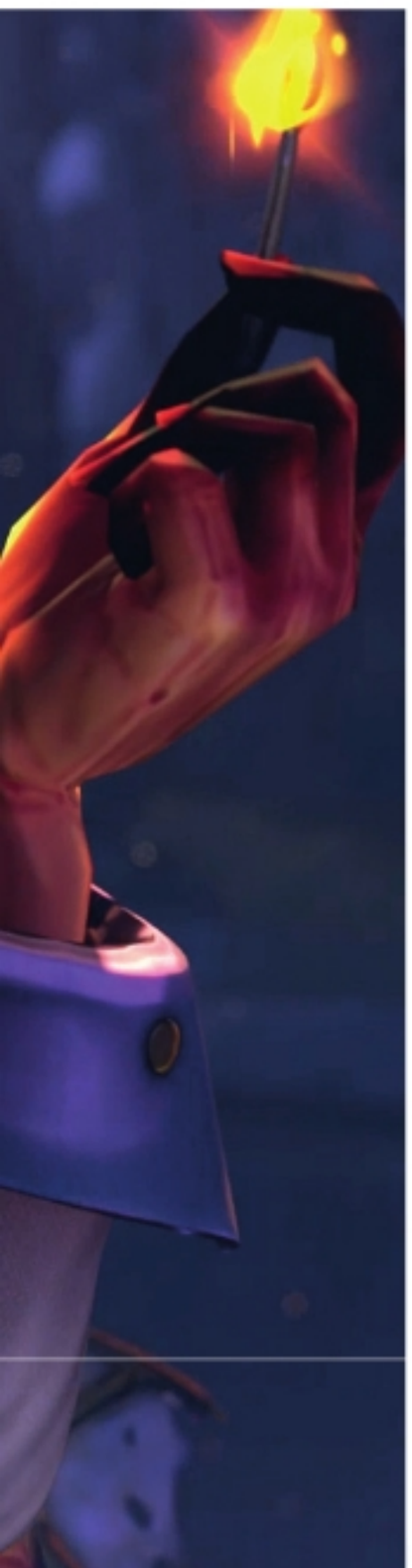
BOTTOM: Irish pixie Hobgen is an enthusiastic pyromaniac.

GOING SOLO

"I think we're much better at making this game now than we were," says Finol when asked what had changed in the last year and if he'd take anything back, "and we had to go through all these steps to get to where we are now."

The release season of *Dota Underlords* is exciting work, featuring the genre's first real single-player campaign: The City Crawl. *Underlords*' story in the *Dota* world, by Valve house writer Steve Jarros, revolves around the death of crime boss Mama Eeb and the struggle to take her place at the top of Whitespire city's crime network. The City Crawl missions are particularly intriguing in their originality and modular, branching presentation. It's very likely to be the most beginner-friendly auto-battler yet because it has a wide variety of fully pausable single-player experiences to learn the ropes with.

Some of that campaign is free to everyone, though most of the single-player stages are only available to those who purchase the game's battle pass. As you might expect, the season one battle pass will also include various cosmetic items unlocked through play. The art we're shown during our visit feels well above the standards of *Dota 2's* already impressive items – the art style really shines when set free of the relatively static world of the top-down MOBA battlefield. *Dota Underlords* is free to cross-play across Steam, iOS, and Android; recently received a fourth Underlord – Enno; and should be officially launched at time of publishing. ■



TIS THE SEASON

What to expect from the first post-Early Access season

The $4.99 battle pass has over 75 rewards such as banners, Rocky the Ravenhook comics, skins, and props to litter your combat arena with. Other players will also now see your customised arena when they come to fight you.

RICKY THE RAVENHOOK AND CREW
ROOKERY WHAT WE HAVE HERE
HEY RICKY! WHAT'S WRONG?
HORGEN BURNED DOWN THE ROOKERY AGAIN...
OH RICKY... THAT'S TERRIBLE
I KNOW. HE'S A MONSTER
IT WAS SUCH A GOOD PLACE TO HIDE DEAD BODIES?
PLOP!
END
RICKY'S WORD ON THE STREET - "STABBY ALLEY ISN'T JUST FOR STABBING; YOU CAN ALSO STRANGLE PEOPLE THERE!"

Summoners are here: Arc Warden and Nature's Prophet return as part of this new alliance, while Lycan, Venomancer, and Broodmother regain their summoning powers and switch to it.

Say goodbye to Scrappy Inventors, as those alliances are taking the season off. (And not a moment too soon.)

It's still undecided, but the team hopes to have three to four seasons per year.

Of course this Valve game has sprays. Of course it does.

The top battle pass reward is ultimate skins for the Underlords.

Other Heroes, Alliances, and Items will rotate to keep the roster fresh.

2020 PREVIEW

Looking ahead to another great year of PC gaming

CYBERPUNK 2077

RELEASE September 17 | **DEV** CD Projekt RED | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** cyberpunk.net

In some ways, it's hard to know what more to say about the *Witcher* developer's upcoming sci-fi RPG. Yes, it still looks slick as hell. Yes, it's still the most highly anticipated game we've seen in years. And yes, we still reckon it'll be something seriously special.

It's been so many years of breathless anticipation that it's surreal to think that – despite another delay, from April to September – *Cyberpunk 2077* is actually, finally coming out this year. Before you know it, we'll be driving around the streets of Night City in a swanky future sports car, hopping out to blast away gangsters, hack people's brains, and get foot-long blades surgically inserted in our arms.

Various pre-release controversies have exposed that the setting is probably less thoughtful than we'd initially hoped – the philosophical and social implications of a dystopian world seem to be taking a backseat to the rule of cool.

But hey, at least they're committed to that rule. We'd struggle to think of many things cooler than Keanu Reeves living in your head, for example. The question now is, how cyberpunk will our PCs need to be to run this beast?

WE'LL BE DRIVING AROUND THE STREETS OF NIGHT CITY IN A SWANKY FUTURE SPORTS CAR

Hey buddy, wanna buy a weird robot?

TELL ME WHY

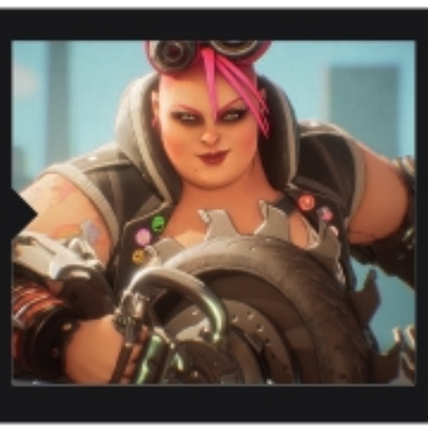
The *Life is Strange* developer's latest project centres on the unique bond between two siblings, one of whom is transgender. It'll take place over three chapters, but they're all releasing at once this summer.

RELEASE: Summer

BLEEDING EDGE

This 4v4 hero brawler from Ninja Theory makes us think of a melee version of *Overwatch*: noisy and chaotic team-based matches filled with colourful, over-the-top characters with some wild abilities.

RELEASE: March 24



ORI AND THE WILL OF THE WISPS

A confident follow-up ready to surpass its predecessor for visual splendour. The Metroidvania exploration looks great, but the slick animation is the star of the show.

RELEASE: March 11

GRIFTLANDS

An RPG where combat and negotiation play out as a card game. It's like *Slay the Spire* only with more story and gorgeous cartoon art. Takes place in a sci-fi junktown full of slugfolk and dog-people.

RELEASE: Autumn

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HUMANKIND

RELEASE 2020 | **DEV** Amplitude Studios | **PUB** Sega | **LINK** humankind.game

Grand strategy from the developer of PC Gamer favourites *Endless Space* and *Endless Legend*, *Humankind's* style of historical nation-building is a pretty clear challenge to *Civilization's* throne. A notable difference is *Humankind*'s single victory condition: being the coolest empire on the planet. As your cities progress through distinct ages, incorporating new cultural ideas or clinging onto traditional customs, you'll accrue Fame points for achievements such as constructing world wonders or taking part in legendary battles.

EMPIRE OF SIN

RELEASE Autumn | **DEV** Romero Games | **PUB** Paradox Interactive | **LINK** empireofsingame.com

Start a mafia and help America's underworld prosper during prohibition. Like the classic *Gangsters: Organized Crime*, *Empire of Sin* makes you a mob boss with a growing empire to nurture. As the head honcho you'll run rackets, raid rivals' properties and deal with the cops by paying them off or fighting them in the streets in turn-based battles. You'll also need to put together a crew who develop as you play, gaining relationships, personality traits, or even an STD from hanging around brothels, just like Mr Capone himself.

MOUNT & BLADE 2: BANNERLORD

RELEASE March | **DEV** Taleworlds Entertainment | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** taleworlds.com

It's finally coming out! After so many years in development, this sequel promises to deepen our favourite janky sandbox medieval sim with vastly improved graphics, more strategic combat, and an overall much deeper simulation of medieval kingdoms and their constantly feuding nobles. Whether you want to take over the world with your all-conquering army, build a merchant empire selling flour and beef, or travel around testing your skills in jousting tournaments, *Bannerlord* promises to cater to almost any playstyle you can imagine.

A TOTAL WAR SAGA: TROY

RELEASE 2020 | **DEV** Creative Assembly Sofia | **PUB** Sega | **LINK** totalwar.com/games/troy

The second *Total War Saga*, or third since *Fall of the Samurai* has been rebranded, mixes myth and fantasy in Bronze-Age Greece and Anatolia. Troy is based on the epic Homeric poem, The Iliad, along with other myths, but explores the conflict between the Hellenic kingdoms and the Trojans through the lens of history. There's even a minotaur, but it's really a massive bloke wielding an axe. On the battlefield, you'll fight with legendary heroes, while units will have new abilities and the maps themselves will include obstacles like mud.

BIOMUTANT

This post-apocalyptic RPG starring a furry little raccoon-thing features... well, everything, from crafting, to customisable mutant powers, to kung-fu combat, to mech suits. No lack of ambition here.

RELEASE: 2020

SABLE

A long-awaited contemplative exploration game where you traverse an infinite desert on customisable speeder bikes, spelunking through the ruins of a lost civilisation. It looks absolutely sublime.

RELEASE: 2020

DESPERADOS 3

Fans of the original series and the more recent *Shadow Tactics: Blades of the Shogun* will feel right at home with this real-time stealth strategy game set in the rootin'-tootin' days of the Old West.

RELEASE: 2020

DISINTEGRATION

At the helm of this new tactical FPS is Marcus Lehto, a key player in the development of the *Halo* series. Set on Earth in the near future, the gimmick here is your gravcycle: a flying vehicle loaded with lots of guns.

RELEASE: 2020

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Reginiting the age-old conflict between snakes and babies.

CRUSADER KINGS III

RELEASE 2020 | **DEV** Paradox Interactive | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** crusaderkings.com

The sequel to Paradox's enduring grand strategy RPG has big shoes to fill, what with its predecessor giving us nearly a decade of weird medieval drama and murder. So much murder.

It looks promising, though, with the developers leaning into its RPG proclivities even more. Characters will have RPG-style progression, as will the dynasties they hail from, and deviating too much from your ruler's personality could make them snap.

Crusader Kings II has evolved and grown over years, but it looks like we won't need to give much of it up. *CKIII* will include most of its predecessor's features, including all the religions and cultures playable from the start, and the map's four times the size. It covers the same geographic areas, but the whole thing has been hugely expanded with new detail and less abstraction.

CHARACTERS WILL HAVE RPG-STYLE PROGRESSION, AS WILL THE DYNASTIES THEY HAIL FROM

GEARS TACTICS

Gears of War meets *XCOM* in this turn-based spin-off. The isometric tactical view suits the series' trademark cover-shooting surprisingly well, and it seems like it'll have some real strategic depth.

RELEASE: April 28

SPIRITFARER

A charming indie adventure that casts you as a ferrymaster transporting spirits to the afterlife. Manage the ship, take care of the passengers, and hear their heartfelt stories before they pass on.

RELEASE: 2020

PSYCHONAUTS 2

Raz and his oddball pals are back, diving into people's dreams to confront their deepest fears. Despite it being 15 years since the first, the platformer will pick up right where the last game left off.

RELEASE: 2020

act id:657065547

Vampires are very fashionable, you see.

VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE: BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE 2020 | **DEV** Hardsuit Labs | **PUB** Paradox Interactive | **LINK** bloodlines2.com

Picking up 16 years after the cult-classic original, *Bloodlines 2* moves the action from the gritty streets of LA to the corporate towers of Seattle, where new money rules and the power of the Camarilla no longer commands respect.

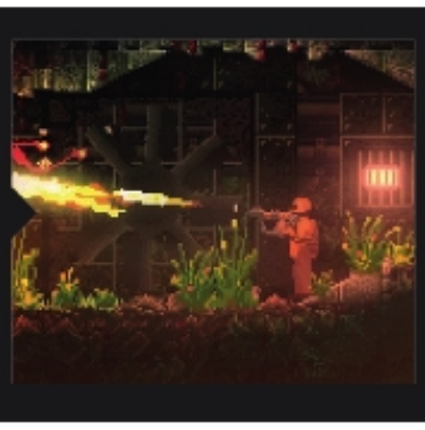
The game promises a more robust character creator than the first *Bloodlines*, with new powers, factions, and 'resonances' adopted from the tabletop game that confer special buffs through blood, while political upheaval provides unlimited opportunities for upstarts and newly-turned vampires bold and ambitious enough to take what they want. Living up to the *Bloodlines* legend will be tough, but developer Hardsuit Labs appears to be taking the job seriously: *Bloodlines 2* was initially slated to come out this month, but has been delayed to an unspecified date later this year.

LIVING UP TO THE BLOODLINES LEGEND WILL BE TOUGH

CARRION

Horror with a twist: you play the monster. As a sort of gory death-blob, your goal is to escape a secret underground facility – and devour every scientist and soldier who stands in your way.

RELEASE: 2020



DYING LIGHT 2

An ambitious sequel that steps beyond the scope of the first game by offering an apocalyptic world that will dramatically change as a result of your decisions. And yes, you can still do sick parkour.

RELEASE: 2020

HAVEN

An RPG adventure that follows two lovers as they begin their new life on a mysterious alien planet. Play as both characters simultaneously or go for co-op if you want to play with your special someone.

RELEASE: 2020

ODDWORLD: SOULSTORM

This retelling of *Abe's Exodus* is looking different than other games in the 25-year-old series – despite the traditional 2D plane it has a massive, sprawling game world and there's crafting in it too.

RELEASE: 2020

act_id:657065547

HALF-LIFE: ALYX

RELEASE March | **DEV** Valve | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** half-life.com/en/alyx

It still doesn't seem quite real. After years of waiting, Valve's finally decided to make a new *Half-Life*. It's not a continuation of Gordon's misadventures, so we'll still have to wait to find out what happens after *Episode 2*, but *Half-Life: Alyx* is exciting for other reasons. Set between the first two games, it's a VR outing featuring Alyx Vance. No more mute protagonist! Valve also promises that, despite not being a sequel, it will still push the story of *Half-Life* forward. Being a VR exclusive does mean a lot of *Half-Life* fans are going to need to invest in new hardware.

RESIDENT EVIL 3

RELEASE April 3 | **DEV** Capcom | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** residentevil.com/re3/uk

After the success of last year's superb *Resident Evil 2* remake, Capcom is continuing the series with a new version of its third PlayStation-era game. Following Jill Valentine's attempts to escape from a zombie-ravaged Raccoon City, the studio says this one won't stick as closely to the source material as the *RE2* remake did. Which, honestly, is fine: *Resident Evil 3* was far from a classic. But we love the idea of revisiting a more detailed, three-dimensional Raccoon City, which we only caught a few glimpses of in the last remake.

DEATH STRANDING

RELEASE Out now | **DEV** Kojima Productions | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** kojimaproductions.jp/en

Kojima's bizarre delivery-man simulator is already out on consoles, but its PC release will likely make this gorgeous game even more stunning. Though it's not for everyone, there's a real charm to *Death Stranding*'s photorealistic landscapes, haunting atmosphere, and weird-as-hell story. It's also deeply rewarding to spend time building structures that you know will appear in other players' games, making their journeys a easier, and there's a kind of genius to turning package delivery into a tense (literal) balancing act.

WATCH DOGS: LEGION

RELEASE 2020 | **DEV** Ubisoft | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** watchdogs.ubisoft.com/game/en-ca

Ubisoft's latest seems crazy ambitious. The gist is that you can play as any NPC, so long as you first recruit them to your shadowy organisation. Every NPC in the world has a simulated life, including traits and relationships, that you can use to your advantage. There are consequences, though. Get a character killed and they'll be dead forever. What's worse, their family and friends might resent your organisation. *Watch Dogs* was a pretty good open-world action game, but *Legion* looks an exciting step forward.

COOK SERVE DELICIOUS 3

Cook delicious meals for your hungry customers while driving your food truck across a near-apocalyptic future USA. Aims to fix the problems of the disappointing second game, and put a greater focus on story.

RELEASE: Spring

GODFALL

***Godfall* promises melee action for up to three co-op players, with *Monster Hunter*-level armour and buckets of loot. With *Borderlands* developer Gearbox taking the publishing role, of course there's loot.**

RELEASE: December

MINECRAFT DUNGEONS

Grab three friends and venture into *Minecraft*'s familiar blocky world with a dungeon crawling twist. Loot wondrous treasures and beef up your arsenal of weapon enchantments as you combine your powers.

RELEASE: April

act_id:657065547

MARVEL'S AVENGERS

RELEASE Sept 4 | **DEV** Crystal Dynamics | **PUB** Square Enix | **LINK** bit.ly/38hq9C5

With their faces tweaked just enough to avoid resembling Chris Hemsworth, Robert Downey Jr, and friends, the disgraced Avengers assemble to improve their public opinion polling and defeat an army of robots in single-player and co-op brawls.

Avengers' visual resemblance to the movies hasn't helped it but performing aerial Iron Man stunts and chucking cars around as Hulk has inherent appeal. The trick will be making every member of the team fun to play, despite their wildly varying power sets – that'll be no mean feat.

XENONAUTS 2

RELEASE 2020 | **DEV** Goldhawk Interactive | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** xenonauts.com

The series we like to call '*XCOM*, PhD' will go into Early Access sometime this year. A beta build has already been circulating among Kickstarter backers, and from the look of it, this sequel is much the same game: a gritty, sandboxy resurrection of the original *X-COM* that includes an air combat metagame, multiple bases, and protracted fights where you're commanding as many as ten soldiers. If you get nostalgic about getting gunned down on the ramp of your Skyranger on turn one, this is the game for you.

WASTELAND 3

RELEASE May 19 | **DEV** inXile Entertainment | **PUB** Deep Silver | **LINK** wasteland3.com

The famed Desert Rangers head to the snowbound climes of post-apocalyptic Colorado for this squad-based isometric RPG sequel. Things go sideways quickly, though, leaving the party stranded and alone in a very unfriendly neighbourhood. You'll need to recruit a new squad, build up your base, and interact with factions including cults, gangs, and raiders, as well as folks just trying to live their lives. In a first for the series, drop-in, drop-out multiplayer will enable two players to control separate squads simultaneously.

KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM 2

RELEASE Autumn | **DEV** Star Theory | **PUB** Private Division | **LINK** kerbalspaceprogram.com

This sequel to the 96%-scoring spaceflight sim is being developed by a new team, Star Theory, made up of hardcore *Kerbal* fans. As well as a dramatic visual overhaul, *Kerbal 2* will introduce two exciting new ways to play: colony building and interstellar travel. You can now leave your home system behind and travel to other star systems. And everything, including building massive interstellar ships, is all rooted in real science. As for what we'll find out there in the universe, Star Theory is keeping that an intriguing secret for now.

OOBLETS

The word 'cuddly' comes to mind when describing *Ooblets*, maybe because nearly everyone is wearing bulky knit sweaters. Think *Stardew Valley*, but you grow cute little monster friends instead of vegetables.

RELEASE: 2020

DARK ALLIANCE

Action-RPG *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance* is making a comeback. It's dropped the Baldur's Gate setting, however, as well as console exclusivity, and the action's moved to the chilly Icewind Dale.

RELEASE: 2020

GODS & MONSTERS

Battle mythical creatures like hydras, cyclops, and gorgons as you attempt to save the Greek gods from Typhon, a giant legendary serpent, in this adventure from the creators of *Assassin's Creed Odyssey*.

RELEASE: Spring

RAINBOW SIX: QUARANTINE

While this co-op shooter takes after *Rainbow Six: Siege* in some ways, expect more Left 4 Dead-style zombie massacring than cautious breaching, as seen in *Siege's* Outbreak event.

RELEASE: 2020

act_id:657065547

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? It's the second one.

MICROSOFT FLIGHT SIMULATOR

RELEASE 2020 | **DEV** Asobo Studio1 | **PUB** Xbox Game Studios | **LINK** flightsimulator.com

When a Microsoft rep told us the whole world was in this reboot of its flagship flight simulator, we didn't believe them. Then they let us play it, and we realised we could drop a pin anywhere on the planet and fly there, from the Grand Canyon to your own home town.

And then there's the dynamic weather and volumetric clouds, which combine to create some stunning scenery. Flying through a thunderstorm, rain streaking across your windshield, is genuinely terrifying. While previous *Microsoft Flight Simulator* games have mostly been about the cold, functional reality of flight, this new game is much more atmospheric, with the production values you'd expect from a AAA blockbuster.

And thanks to a variety of assists, if you want to play it with an Xbox controller while slumped on the sofa, you can.

FLYING THROUGH A STORM, RAIN STREAKING ACROSS YOUR WINDSHIELD, IS TERRIFYING

STAR RENEGADES

A promising hands-on last year revealed a game of striking pixel-art and tense turn-based battles. It's almost *Into The Breach*-esque – you know what your enemy's about to do, but how do you counter it?

RELEASE: 2020

LAIR OF THE CLOCKWORK GOD

Swap between two characters, one a point-and-click adventurer, the other a platformer, as you try to prevent several apocalypses from happening at once.

RELEASE: 2020

HALO INFINITE

The PC is missing *Halo 5*, but we'll take a new one. We don't know much yet except that Infinite's powered by the fancy new Slipspace Engine. Based on some super limited teasers, it's going to look really good.

RELEASE: December

Games

280

YOUR GUIDE TO THE LATEST PC GAMES.

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SCORING SYSTEM

PCPP scores its games on a 1 to 10 scale. The higher, the better – though 10 is by no means a "perfect" game. We're not convinced such a thing exists, so consider a 10 a masterpiece of PC gaming, despite its inevitable flaws. A 5 is a decidedly average game; one that doesn't excel in any particular area, without being an affront to our senses – the ultimate in mediocrity. Below this, you'll start to find the games our reviewers suffered an aneurysm getting through; above it, the titles truly worth your time and money. And remember: a score is only a vague indication of quality. Always read the full review for the definitive opinion!

POWERED BY
REPUBLIC OF GAMERS

Zombie Army 4: Dead War

Does exactly what it says on the tin.

DEVELOPER REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS • **PUBLISHER** REBELLION DEVELOPMENTS
zombiearmy.com

Kill-cams are a good way of boning up on human anatomy.

In this analogy, the feeling you get as you chomp down – that beautiful weightless moment before the regret and mild tummy ache and the memory that you have a family history of diabetes – is clicking the left mouse button to fire your weapon and hearing the satisfying squish of another zombie's cranium exploding. As gaming pleasures go, it's not quite on a par with the solution to a fiendish puzzle clicking into place somewhere in the bottom of your brain or the explosion of possibility that comes from trying something stupid and getting a response that shows the developers saw you coming. But it is certainly exceedingly moreish.

Over the 15 years and six games that have led to this point, starting with 2005's Sniper Elite, Rebellion has honed this one moment to its sharpest possible point. The kickback on a submachine gun weapon, each shot punching your reticule higher and closer to that all-important headshot, has all the mass-produced genius of a Jaffa Cake's sponge base. The way zombies tumble quivering to the ground when you hit them with an electrified bullet, delicious as just-slightly-dark chocolate. And pushing in with your sniper scope, framing a distant face in intimate close-up, then watching as your round whizzes in slow-motion from the chamber, out across the level and then into their eye socket, through the squishy mass of brain, and out the far side of their skull? You'd better believe that's the ambiguous gelatinous orange filling – the dirty little thrill that is, as much as you'd be ashamed to admit it, what you're here for in the first place.

There's nothing wrong with a few empty calories now and then. But then you look back to the metaphorical cupboard, and realise… it's still full. There are another couple of hundred zombies between you and the level exit, and beyond that nine chapters' worth of campaign, each of them a few hours long. Then a horde mode, the weekly challenges that add fresh modifiers to familiar levels. And, the big innovation for this latest instalment, a hundred levels of character perks, weapon upgrades and unlockable cosmetics to chew your way through.

WHAT IS IT?

Four humans, infinite zombies, hours and hours of well-made shootybangs

FLESHED OUT

It'd be churlish to say there's too much of Dead War – Rebellion has clearly built this game to last, keeping in mind those players who crave endless undead to pour bullets into, making sure they're fed until the next one comes shambling along. And it never gets boring, exactly. The game does a great job of switching things up: in one chapter, you go from a boat ride through Venice to defending a base from zombies that drop from the sky, sans parachute, and finally all-out war in a waterlogged arena where you can feed enemies (or, as I learned, friends) to an undead shark.

Let's linger on that shark for a moment, because why the hell wouldn't you? It's one of the many traps that litter every level, alongside your common-or-garden explosive barrels and precariously dangling weights that can be shot loose to squish any zombies below. In co-op, they're one of the few things that cause friendly-fire damage – and not only that, they tend to be insta-kills, with no chance for a revival. I'm not saying exactly how I found this out but suffice to say that if you ever want to end a decade-long friendship, try sucking said friend into the spinning blade of a turbine, turning their carefully customised character into mincemeat.

Traps are one of the many ways Dead War switches up the rhythm of

COLLECTOMANIA *Tat you can find in* Dead War

COMICS
Sadly just the covers, but these are spot-on homages to classic war comics. Which makes sense, given Rebellion owns 2000AD.

NOTES
Writing is not this game's strong suit, so these diary entries and missives are there to be ticked off rather than read.

HANDS
Like The Addams Family's Thing, a no-longer-appended appendage with a life of its own. Often hidden up in the rafters.

UPGRADE KIT
This is what you're really here for. Grab one of these and you can add a bigger magazine or bullets that explode.

HEROIC ACTION
You have to wonder how survivors feel about their lives being ranked alongside a letter as a collectible.

Zombie shark? Eye of Sauron tower? Must be a WWII setting.

Multiplayer comes with all the emotes you'd expect.

Guns can be customised all the way down to their scope design.

These Black Lagoon monstrosities spit zombie musk all over you.

Ragdoll physics + slo-mo X-Rays = frequent brilliance.

its violence. The kill-cams, with their cutaways to the inner workings of your latest victim, help punctuate the action, but more important are the various special attacks that charge up as you play. There's a powerful melee attack on a constant cooldown timer, replacing your usual ineffective shove with a machete slash or Thor-style hammer strike. Getting ten kills with a particular weapon will activate its special ability, which might be slowing down time or handing you a few guaranteed headshots. And if you manage to chain ten kills together in a combo, you can pull off a Takedown, a gruesome one-hit melee kill that rewards you with some health, similar to Doom's glory kills.

The threats you're dealing with vary too. As well as your rank-and-file shamblers, there are commanders who can resurrect their underlings, nimble roof-hopping snipers, and those guys who run towards you screaming then explode, having apparently sprinted all the way here from Serious Sam. There's even a literal meat wagon to contend with – half-track APCs with gooey pink flesh between its armour plates and a hatch that opens to reveal some unnervingly human innards. These foes mean your reticle has to frequently wander away from standard head height, because weak points can vary from explosive hearts to back-mounted fuel tanks.

NUMBERS GAME

Ultimately, though, the game is made up of small variations on that same snack-size experience, repeated over and over again. A limited-edition lemon-and-lime Jaffa Cake is still, at the end of the day, another Jaffa Cake. And you start to suspect Dead War knows it, because it's constantly trying to distract you with the glint of something shiny. Which, most of the time, means a number getting gradually bigger and bigger.

Every kill has a point value; pull off a few in quick succession and the game will apply a combo multiplier to your score. (In multiplayer, this quickly overwhelms the rest of the game. It's possible for one player to get exponentially ahead of the others, which can quickly turn co-op into something more competitive. I'm not saying that I intentionally sucked my friend into that rotor engine, but… does anyone know a good lawyer?)

At the end of each section, your point total is converted into XP. There are ways to earn bonuses, like finding collectibles and completing section-specific challenges that ask you to kill a few dozen enemies with fire or feed them to a shark or land headshots while your boat is in motion. From there, XP pushes you up through levels, which open up your abilities back in the game and make it easier to rack up high scores. It's an airtight loop, one that is perfectly compelling when you're inside of it – but it's worth remembering that something being airtight doesn't just mean oxygen can't escape. It also means fresh air can't get in.

Stepping back from an hours' long session of Dead War can get a bit existential. At time of writing, I've murdered a small town's worth of zombies. One night, in the midst of it all, I lay awake in the dark with my brain still busily sorting through the act of lining up a shot and pulling the trigger, like a much gorier version of the Tetris Effect. Thank God I'm thoroughly desensitised. It's not the violence that disturbs me, but the feeling that I could see the game laid out flat, a conveyor belt of slow-motion headshots stretching out into infinity in front and behind of me.

This feeling pretty much goes away when you're playing with others, the same way it feels better to split a bottle of wine or have multiple hungry fingers all pulling at the foil of the same crisp packet, exposing its delicious innards to the group. I'm not even sure Dead War is a better game with more players – the impact of each person's actions quickly gets lost in the chaos, so you rarely know which shot caused that zombie's head to implode – but it makes for a good accompaniment to chatting the same kind of nonsense you normally would around a sticky table top in a pub. Feel free to mentally add a couple of points onto the score for every mate you reckon can be won over with an Evil Dead-style, "Join us".

And, of course, even playing on your own, you could make Dead War part of a healthy nutritious diet. Much like that packet of biscuits or crisps or whatever snack food you've been imagining this whole time, you don't actually need to eat the whole thing at once. You could enjoy a sensible amount of its beautifully realised high-definition ultraviolence, put it down, come back later, have a few more nibbles. But you won't, will you? You'll always have another until you feel bloated and dizzy and a bit sick. And fair play. January's over now, which means we all can shed the pretence of our New Year's resolutions and give in to the hungry zombie within. ALEX SPENCER PC

HUMAN(ISH) TARGET

A guide to shooting zombie where it hurts

1 HEAD
You know the drill by now: remove the head or destroy the brain. Then watch in slow motion as it all collapses into splinters of bone and red mush.

2 HEART
Shot through the heart and you're to blame. For some enemy types, hitting the old ticker is the only way to stop them from rising again.

3 OTHER ORGANS
Look, I'm not a doctor. All I know is these zombies are filled with what – based on the results of blowing them up – are still vital organs.

4 TESTICLES
A shot to the nads isn't especially effective, tactically speaking, but the game will commend you for having the, ahem, balls to go for it.

"I lay awake in the dark with my brain still busily sorting through the act of lining up a shot and pulling the trigger, like a much gorier version of the Tetris Effect. Thank God I'm thoroughly desensitised."

VERDICT:

An excellently-crafted shooter, especially with friends. Just don't expect much in the way of brains.

7

Super Crush KO

A one-hit wonder.

DEVELOPER VERTEX POP • **PUBLISHER** VERTEX POP
vertexpop.com/supercrushko

It's a tale as old as time: girl meets alien warlord. Alien warlord comes crashing through her bedroom wall, steals her cat and maybe her heart. Girl grabs a laser rifle and heads out to get her cat back. Functionally, as a setup for a videogame, this mightn't be all that different to 'your princess is in another castle', but paired with a bright art style that looks like it's been scrawled onto your monitor in pastels, it's exactly the kind of thing that makes me do the heart eyes.

So, yeah, it was pretty much love at first sight with Super Crush KO, which reminded me of Steven Universe and Scott Pilgrim and Sayonara Wild Hearts.

Peel back the impeccable presentation and underneath you'll find a straightforward 2D brawler. Armed with the laser gun and a selection of punches, kicks and dashes, you move left to right, clearing screen after screen of robotic nasties. But Super Crush KO's action lacks zest. As gorgeous as the art is, in motion it's never quite as smooth as you'd hope. Your character feels a little like one of those paper dolls you made as a kid, putting pins in the joints so you could jiggle its limbs.

It's not exactly the kind of combat you'd hold up next to a Devil May Cry but, like those games, Super Crush KO is constantly marking your performance, with a UI-dominating letter grade sat at the top of the screen. And this is the aspect of the game I'm most torn about.

On one hand, it's the engine that powers Super Crush KO. It's seemingly possible to stitch entire levels into a single elongated combo, taking advantage of the special moves that send your character dashing forwards and the range of your laser rifle to ensure there's never a moment of dead air. The challenge here isn't so much beating the aliens as it is maintaining a keepy-uppy of hits and dodges, lest your 'A' grade be replaced with a dreaded 'D'.

What is it?

A cute beat-'em-up with enough visual flair to land a series order from Cartoon Network

On the other, I'm not sure how well this actually fits with every other part of the game. Some of this, admittedly, might be personal bias, but the constant reminder of your current grade means that every moment you're not landing a punch feels like a failure.

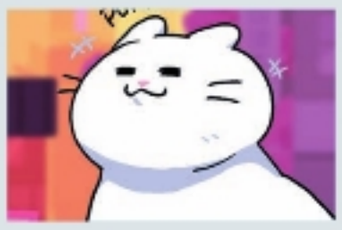
It's not that a bright colourful exterior can't conceal sharp teeth (just look at Cuphead) but more that its simple combat system never earns the inevitable knot of stress in the pit of my stomach that accompanies a ticking combo timer.

UNENGAGED

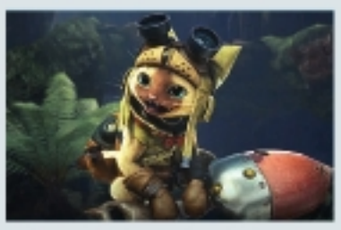
Honestly, you don't need to engage your brain much when playing. I quickly found myself reaching for headphones (the music, unfortunately, never rises above the 'serviceable' level) and the game just became a way to keep my hands and eyes busy while I fixed my attention on a podcast. And after a while, even my eyes stopped registering Super Crush KO's ample charm.

See, when it comes to visual style, we're fickle little magpies, always hungry for something novel. Even the prettiest game, if it never grows or changes, our brains can get very good at looking past it straight to the underlying systems – and at that point, it might as well be all stickmen and grey boxes. Take Sayonara Wild Hearts, one of the games I thought of in that first flutter of infatuation. It's got a remarkable aesthetic, but it flings a new idea at you every few seconds. And so eyes inevitably wander, seeking a pretty new thing to crush on instead. Look, I'm not proud of it, but I'm already eyeing up this hot indie game that's just wandered into my Steam recommendations, with style up to here and aesthetics for hours. This time, I'm sure, it's got to be true love. ALEX SPENCER PC

TOP CAT *Chubbz is the star, but how does he compare to other gaming pets?*



CHUBBZ
An excellent argument for nominative determinism, Chubbz is more loaf than cat. Not very loyal but what were you expecting?



PALICO
Monster Hunter World's Palicoes are unlike real cats in two ways: they're helpful and they don't mind being dressed up.

BOOMER
Bad game, good dog. Boomer is the best of *Far Cry 5*'s companion NPCs, even counting the other two Fangs for Hire.

THE GOOSE
This anarchist is nobody's pet. You've seen what it did to that village, why would you want it in your house? Still cute though.

VERDICT:
Floaty combat and repetition means cartoon brawler Super Crush KO is never more than a pretty face.

5

The White Door

Beneath simple lines lies a different reality.

DEVELOPER RUSTY LAKE • **PUBLISHER** SECOND MAZE
rustylake.com/adventure-games/the-white-door.html

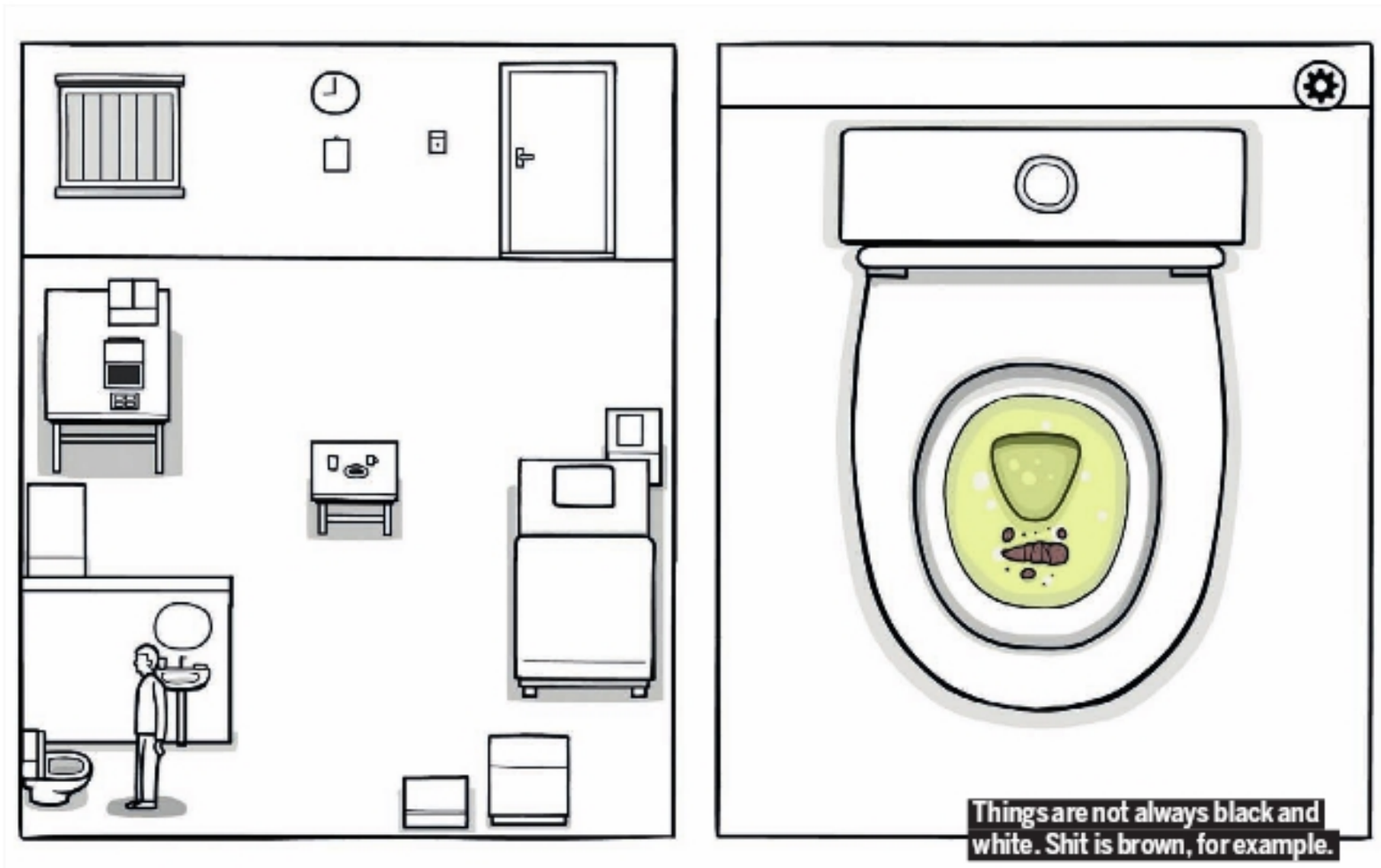
An absence of colour can be wielded in media with all sorts of intentions, but the most profound effect monochrome has is to make you notice what isn't there. There's an implication that something's thematically missing when you watch a world in black and white, so we tend to look at monochrome game worlds as a stylistic shorthand for grief, loss, depression, and other such subject matter that can really mess up your Sunday.

That's certainly true of Rusty Lake's The White Door, but in this point-and-click-meets ayahuasca journey you're asking the question literally, not just figuratively: what's missing? Small changes to the daily routine imposed by the white coats behind the white door; an empty white plate instead of the meals you're used to receiving at exactly 5.00pm – these feel like major narrative revelations in the minimalist confines of your cell.

You are Robert Hill and the year is 1972. You know this because it's written on the calendar on your wall and the driving licence in your drawer. Otherwise, the wheres and whys of your life, most pertinently how you ended up in a mental health facility, elude both character and player. What follows is a few days of mundane hour-by-hour routine laid out by unseen people who – you hope – are caring for you.

It's a classic bout of testing the player's obedience, pushing you further and further with prosaic tasks like brushing your teeth, at the same time, every single morning, until you start to question things, pick at the corners of that simple white box you're confined within, and uncover something more complex.

While you poke about at the bits between the game, Robert too goes somewhere else between his monotonous days, escaping in his dreams. Here a story starts to form of how he might have ended up behind the eponymous door and why he looks so glum in the mirror every day.



Things are not always black and white. Shit is brown, for example.

WHAT IS IT?

A minimalist puzzley adventure about mental health

Mechanically it's always light-touch. You might be dragging a coffee cup up to Robert's lips as he narrates that he took another sip of coffee in a dream sequence, or answering multiple choice questions during your daily psychological examination. As it progresses it becomes something more like a traditional puzzle game, employing pattern recognition and logic challenges to gate progression, but The White Door's woozy tone means you're never sure of the rules.

Sometimes that's a good thing. It means you don't question why doing X produces outcome Y but just lose yourself to the flow of the journey.

MUDDLED MEMORIES

Games concerning themselves with mental health issues are increasingly common, and this one doesn't have much subtlety about it by comparison to its peers. Darkness and colour. Muddled memories. Sinister psych wards – all the classics are here, and its opaque storytelling style is a trope too. Despite all that I found the subject matter much more challenging than the puzzles. The White Door is a game about feeling as bad as it's possible to feel, and with just a few brushstrokes and some voice acting it's unpleasantly effective in putting you in that mental space. It is also a game about feeling better, and enduring life's colour-drained, joyless passages, emerging from the other side, and finding beauty in the smallest, simplest things. All of us can find personal relevance and significance in that, and I suppose that's the power The White Door has.

In two hours, using art assets that while well-drawn wouldn't look out of place on Newgrounds for their minimalism and resource economy, The White Door gets under your skin and makes you feel what it's like to be somebody else. And it does this not with its exposition sequences or puzzles, but by making you live Robert Hill's tightly scheduled life, toilet trips and all. PHIL IWANIUK PC

> "It's a classic bout of testing the player's obedience, pushing you further and further with prosaic tasks like brushing your teeth, at the same time, every single morning."

VERDICT:
Obtuse in its puzzles and not that artfully told, The White Door is still effective at taking you to another place.

7

Paranoia: Happiness is Mandatory

Subvert or support an underground dystopia.

DEVELOPER BLACK SHAMROCK, CYANIDE • **PUBLISHER** BIGBEN INTERACTIVE
epicgames.com/store/en-US/product/paranoia/home

The dystopia of enforced happiness has been dissected across media obsessively for decades, pretty much since capitalism and communism emerged as the two opposing ideologies of the 20th century, and did all in their power to show citizens on the other side just how happy we all are.

It's a theme that often plays out as satire, but Paranoia: Happiness is Mandatory, based on the tabletop RPG, goes meta by parodying that satire. It's witty and brimming with maddening bureaucracy and obfuscating double-speak that's part Joseph Heller, part Aldous Huxley.

You are a clone, born into adulthood in a futuristic underground society called Alpha Complex. It's a rigidly hierarchical place, run by an all-seeing AI called Friend Computer, and filled with subservient people wearing colour-coded jumpsuits that denote their social standing. One small step out of line, and your treason will begin to accrue.

Treason is all too easy to commit in Paranoia, and you'll need to quickly learn how to tow the line lest your treason level reaches 100 per cent and you're summoned for incineration by Friend Computer. Speaking out of turn, asking too many questions, or even giving the wrong answers at a confession booth designed to absolve you of your transgressions are just a few of the slip-ups you can make.

You're always paranoid, always wondering what petty action will get you in trouble this time. Even your own team members can go crying to the authorities in their hopes of becoming team leader themselves. It's a system that imbues each dialogue choice with gravitas.

You progress by completing missions for Friend Computer – choosing from a small pool of team members to join you, each with different skills and personalities, then heading out into different parts of the underground.

DETECTIVE WORK

These missions are at their strongest when leaning into detective work. One early mission sees you tracking down a traitor who's been rewiring vending machines to kill people. You need to sneak and schmooze your way onto crime scenes to deduce what happened.

I always have time for a game that lets you play the bastard. Double-crossing double-crossers, or executing enemies after smooth-talking some intel from them feels deliciously evil. At these points, Paranoia follows the prestigious path of RPG sleuth-athon Disco Elysium in showing that a well-written game can be compelling with minimal combat.

True to CRPG tradition, combat is real-time with pause. You can direct squad members to get behind cover, flank enemies, and use some cooldown-based abilities, but beyond the bosses the enemy AI rarely tests you. For the most part, you can pew-pew your way through the game with laser rifles, rockets, and the occasional ability. There's a loot system here too, but the limited range of interesting weaponry and armour along with tight and fiddly inventory space means that it's rarely worth the hassle to go through.

Take out a teammate and their clones still reappear for the next mission, which somewhat dulls the impact of your decisions, but in the moment they create welcome unexpected scenarios.

Paranoia loves to point to the pointlessness of your actions for comic effect, but in doing so at the expense of compelling mechanics and systems, it tends to feel a little pointless itself, lacking a clear incentive for you to push through the game. ROBERT ZAK PC

Boss battles are intense but often fiddly affairs due to limited team management.

WHAT IS IT?

A comedic and light cRPG with active-pause tactical combat

VERDICT:
A witty and weird RPG hybrid that unfortunately never quite follows through with its more interesting ideas.

6

WHY TREASON?

It's easy to break the laws of Alpha Complex and increase your treason level. Here are some of the stranger treasonous behaviours you need to avoid

TREASON LEVEL: 5
Stepping into an area demarcated for those of higher social standing than you

TREASON LEVEL: 10
Initiating conversation with those of higher social standing than you

TREASON LEVEL: 15
Asking questions that attempt to gain information beyond your clearance

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15

TREASON LEVEL: (VARIOUS)
Giving the wrong answers in a confession booth designed to decrease your treason level.

Avicii Invector

Eulogises the Swedish star with mournful passion.

DEVELOPER HELLO THERE GAMES • **PUBLISHER** WIRED PRODUCTIONS
invectorgame.com

Videogames have the power to work miracles. Songs like Levels, Waiting for Love, and Wake Me Up soundtracked my evenings in nightclubs. I fuzzily recall grumbling, "You'll never find me listening to this at 3.00am on a weeknight when I'm older." Instead, the best part of ten years later, I'm doing exactly that. Except this time I'm toe-tapping away to Tim Bergling's (aka Avicii) inoffensive earworms in my flat. And slippers.

This is thanks to Avicii Invector, but this isn't your average rhythm-action game. The project that aimed to enhance Bergling's brand of electronic dance and house music by combining it with interactive and mesmeric environments commenced in 2015, but the Swedish club sensation passed away in April 2018 before the game's release. Hello There Games and Bergling's team subsequently finished what had been left off, with a percentage of the proceeds going to the Tim Bergling Foundation, which supports those with mental health problems. It imbues the final experience with profound poignancy beneath the upbeat sheen of the Swedish DJ's party anthems.

That final experience is 25 of Avicii's biggest hits grouped into five distinct, ravishing worlds, and each song plays in a way reminiscent of Amplitude and Thumper. As you endeavour to match each note to the corresponding one on your pad – I prefer this to the keyboard controls, but they work just fine – with the best timing possible on three different lane types that ensure that no song becomes a chore.

Timing boosts with a highly-anticipated drop doesn't get old.

PURE GRINDING

First, and most simple, is a flat road where your ship merrily hops from one note to the next, but you'll have to move laterally to hit them all. Then there are the triangular pathways: here you flip the lane onto its relevant side, instead of moving right and left, and manoeuvring the wrong way can throw you way off as notes fly past you, upside down. The third and final type isn't really a lane at all: it launches you away from a path altogether, giving you floating targets through which to zoom.

It's in these moments that the neon grandeur of your environments stand out; eschewing a fixed path completely sees much of the UI disappear, letting you fully appreciate environments filled with towering skyscrapers and craggy cliffs, all pulsating with the track you're playing and exploding with colour. It plays a little like Rez Infinite as you're relieved of the shackles of traditional notes and lanes.

Your charming pilot appears between-planets on your first playthrough in a series of short, nicely-drawn vignettes, but their story is incidental. That said, they are skippable and don't appear again after your first playthrough, which should take one to two hours.

Of course, determined Avicii detractors will get little from Invector, but those on the fence will struggle to remain unmoved as everything falls into place. That said, the distribution of the 25 of the artist's biggest hits that make up the game is a little off: the best-known are heavily concentrated in the City and Ice worlds.

While that isn't necessarily a problem on your first go when everything feels fresh, it's something that becomes more pronounced over time. After each song and planet is unlocked, it's available on all three difficulties. But when I tried to launch straight into the mid-game City world after polishing off easy, the jump to medium proved too much at first. Invector does a good job of onboarding you to the next difficulty if you progress from beginning to end, but that may mean repeating your least favourites.

Despite that, Avicii Invector is an excellent, sometimes overwhelming, experience. While it's impossible to know the state of the game when the DJ passed away, an infectious affection for Bergling's work now oozes from the rush of each break to every cathartic drop. HARRY SHEPHERD PC

WHAT IS IT?

A rhythm-action game inspired by the now-deceased Swedish DJ

> "It's in these moments that the neon grandeur of your environments stand out; eschewing a fixed path completely sees much of the UI disappear, letting you fully appreciate environments."

VERDICT:
A sumptuous fusion of sound, colour and love that even dance obstinate music-phobes should try out.

8

Wattam

Finds cuteness and fun in everyday objects.

DEVELOPER FUNOMENA • **PUBLISHER** ANNAPURNA INTERACTIVE
annapurna.pictures/interactive/wattam

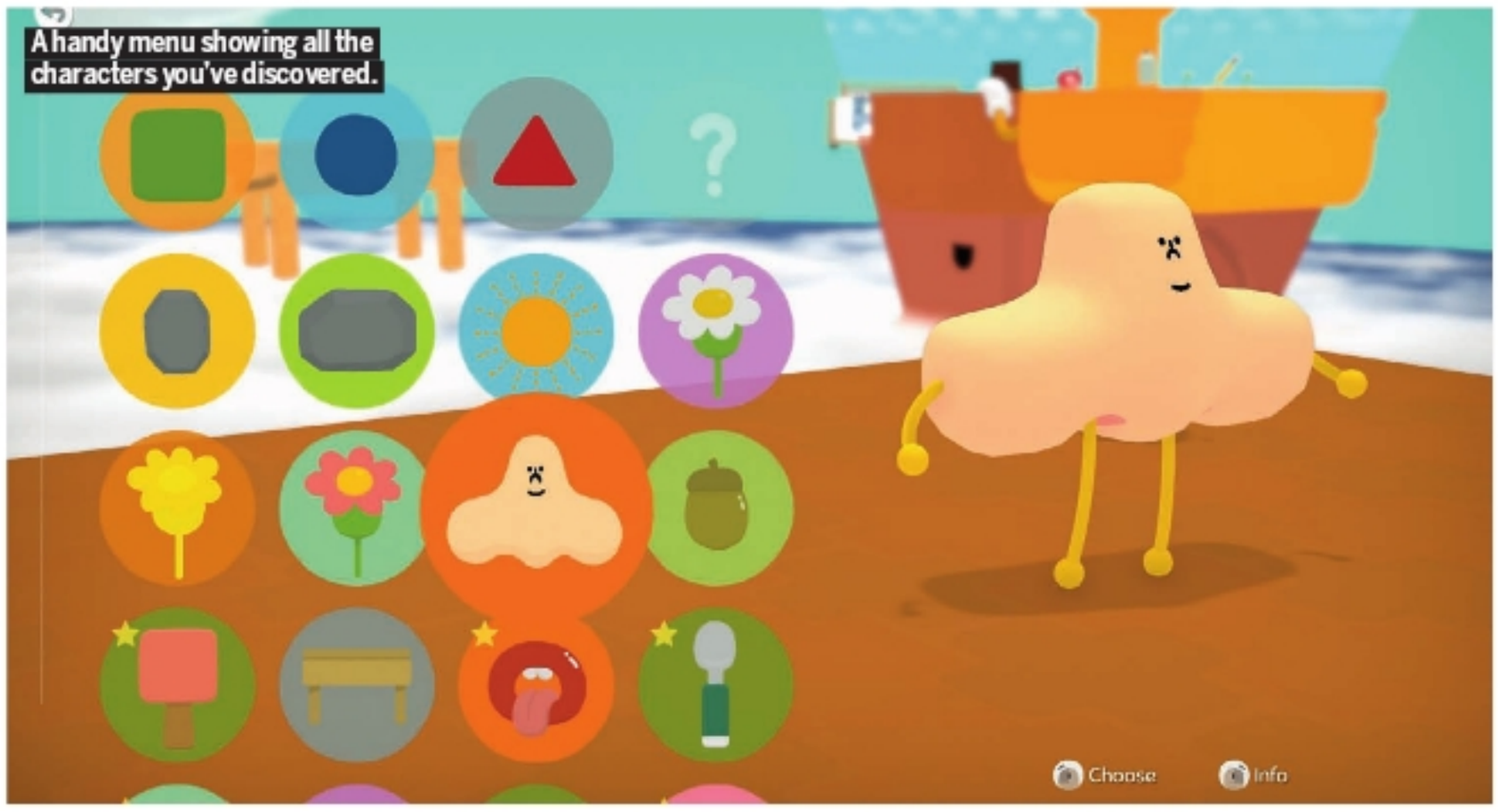
When Katamari released in 2004, it surprised players and critics with its joyous mechanics and soundtrack. It was an energetic, colourful bolt from the blue, and its creator, Keita Takahashi, was launched into the spotlight. Although Katamari, and his later game Noby Noby Boy, released over a decade ago, Takahashi's latest game, Wattam, has the same free-spirited imagination and playful sense of fun.

In Wattam you play as the Mayor, a green cube wearing a black bowler who sports a dapper moustache. But as happy as a fancy hat and facial hair would make me, the Mayor in Wattam is far from pleased. At the beginning, he is the sole character in a dark and empty world. But then, a tiny stone named David appears, and the two make quick friends. Suddenly, a rock named Robert spurts from the ground and joins in the fun. More and more objects keep arriving and, before you know it, the world of Wattam is thriving with loads of cute everyday objects.

As each character joins the game's ever-growing community, you're given the ability to control whoever you like, from Michelle the small but spritely acorn to a giant table called Malcolm. Some of Wattam's characters are blessed with special abilities – if you control the onion you'll make characters cry as you run past them, or you can play as a huge tree that sucks characters into its mouth (don't worry – they grow back as fruit, of course).

When you're busy controlling one character, the others just goof around. They climb on top of each other, hang out in groups and aimlessly run around. It's like watching a group of toddlers, and it's super adorable – well, apart from Kyle, the huge gaping mouth with its tongue hanging out that chases after the food characters. He seriously needs to chill out.

The Mayor has the best ability, though. Hidden underneath that shiny bowler is a special surprise – it's a bomb! But this is a game by Takahashi, so it's a fun bomb. Characters explode into the sky with a burst of confetti and land in a fit of delightful giggles. After your vibrant display, they'll run up to you shouting "Kaboom!" demanding to be launched sky high once again.



A handy menu showing all the characters you've discovered.

WHAT IS IT?

A fun adventure where you control a host of inanimate objects

CHILD'S PLAY

Takahashi has created this bonkers box of fun objects to play with, but there's also a story that plays out. The Mayor and all the characters of this world have forgotten why they were all separated from each other in the first place, and this reason slowly gets revealed as more objects return.

This story pops its head in a couple of times and wraps up nicely in the finale, but your main activity revolves around helping characters solve their problems. These storylines are a little less post-apocalyptic and more Saturday morning cartoony. Its fun and childlike, like helping Deborah the balloon overcome her fear of heights or helping a telephone find its lost receiver. These mini missions convey Wattam's core message, which boils down to: make friends and have fun. Which I think is just lovely but will, no doubt, not be for everyone.

Within all of Wattam's frantic fun, I did run into a few hitches. The controls can be a bit finicky, and I had a constant battle with the camera in particular. When creating Katamari, Takahashi said in an interview that he wanted to capture the fun of when a child rolls a ball. With Wattam, it's like the joy of delving into an open toy box. You can gather all the fruit together and have them form a single giant tower, or you can go nick the Mayor's hat and make a toilet wear it instead.

What does the fan character do? Oh it creates a gust of air – now I want to run around knocking over all the characters. It's the same feeling as when you first honk in Untitled Goose Game – you're finding fun in silliness. Takahashi places that above all else, and even after a decade it's still a refreshing perspective. RACHEL WATTS PC

> "Takahashi has created this bonkers box of fun objects to play with, but there's also a story that plays out."

VERDICT:
A fun, friendly, and colourful toybox full of new friends. It's a not deep experience, but it's not trying to be.

7

Journey to the Savage Planet

A further cry.

DEVELOPER TYPHOON STUDIOS • **PUBLISHER** EPIC GAMES
savageplanetgame.com

There's a real kick to reaching a new biome and taking in the sights.

It looks like No Man's Sky and it's made by Far Cry 4 director Alex Hutchinson, so perhaps it's best to start with which games Journey to the Savage Planet is not like. Although you and a co-op partner find yourself on a distant planet, it isn't anything like as non-linear or as vast as No Man's Sky. And sure, there's a gun occupying the bottom-right of the screen, but Far Cry in space it is not. What Typhoon Studios has made with its debut title is something else entirely.

Something that gives you a real sense of being stranded in a huge and uncharted alien environment, but carefully curates your path through it. That path takes you through platforming sequences, boss battles, mob fights, and environmental puzzles, and often calls upon you to double back and use a new bit of kit in an old area to access previously out of reach places. It does all this while regularly making me laugh along with its story beats, and making me care about its central mystery: if the planet's supposedly bereft of intelligent life, what's that enormous tower doing right in the middle of it?

It's a comedy-Metroidvania-survival-shooter-platformer, then. As a Kindred Aerospace employee shot out into the farthest reaches of who-knows-where to chart the planet and see if there's anything worth the company's time, you find yourself in a pickle when – stop me if you've heard this one – your spacecraft's damaged during landing. A voyage of discovery's required to survive and source the parts needed to fuel your journey back home. A simplistic enough setup, but it has real life breathed into it by the outright silliness of JTTSP's writing, including live action commercial spoofs and memorable Facetimes with your CEO. Humour's famously subjective, but even the behaviour of the loading bar on the vessel computer got me. Really. A funny loading bar.

WHAT IS IT?
A survival-Metroidvania hybrid with jokes

The game might even be hoisted on its own petard here, because when it's played in co-op, it's easy to let your Discord bantz drown out the jokes, or to race ahead without stopping to appreciate the details. In fact, this may actually work better as a solo game all-round, where you only need worry about one person being lost instead of two.

It's an interesting mix of aggressive wildlife, cutesy fauna, and joyously weird scenery that entices you deeper once you're outside the safety of your crashed ship, and JTTSP plays on this deviously. Pufferbirds, the first sentient beings you encounter, are at least 50 per cent eyeball, and their trusting coos are impossible not to find endearing. In a purely mechanical sense, they exist to produce carbon when you feed them Grob. What's more pertinent is that if you overfeed Pufferbirds in your quest for carbon, they simply pop. Worse, the only way I found to make it past a meat vortex (think organic waste disposal) was to lure those wide-eyed, innocent Pufferbirds into vortex-sucking range and continue along the path while they were being eviscerated.

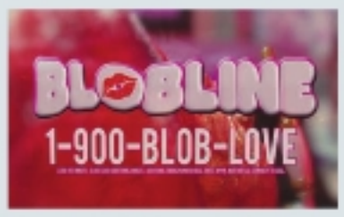
FIGHTING FAUNA

Very little of the plants and creatures around you is there just to fill the space, and there's a mild puzzle element to almost everything with a pulse.

The irony is that the closer you come to fuelling your ship and starting the journey back home, the more bewitching your current climate becomes. The simple rules of each biome – use grapple seeds to scale the cliffs of Mt Gzarfyn, double-jump between the mushroom pads of the Fungi of Si'ned VII, lob blight bombs in the Matriarch's Lair – become a kind of second nature that roots you to the place and turns a once totally alien landscape into something fondly familiar. PHIL IWANIUK PC

BUY NOW, SLAVE LATER *Weird products for sale on Kindred TV*

MINI MALL MONKEYS
See tiny people shop, then declare a Black Friday and watch them turn feral.



BLOBLINE
Chat to some of the hottest formless blobs in the galaxy. Discreet, steamy... blobby.

MEAT BUDDY
Reanimate your excess animal matter in this handy device. Not much fun for vegans though.

GROB
The galaxy's number four sustenance source. The numbers speak for themselves really.

VERDICT:
Funny, fresh, and full of surprises, Typhoon's debut blends genres expertly. Co-op doesn't add much, though.

8

Phoenix Point

Brings great ideas to the formula, but tries for too much.

DEVELOPER SNAPSHOT GAMES • **PUBLISHER** IN-HOUSE
phoenixpoint.info

A terrible disease has overtaken mankind. The Pandoravirus, an alien threat that's mutating and twisting our world into one controlled by swarms of hybrid creatures emerging from the seas. Society has collapsed and new social movements have risen. A few rogue military operatives seek to revive an old initiative dedicated to securing the future. It will not be easy, as Phoenix Point chooses strategic complexity over tactical simplicity.

In this Phoenix Point is very much a successor to the original X-COM – unsurprisingly, as it's designed by series creator Julian Gollop. In terms of core design, turn-based tactics games don't get much better than Phoenix Point. To my chagrin, they also don't get much better than in terms of copious bugs and poor AI.

It's still heavily influenced by recent turn-based games. The design language of the interface will be very familiar to anyone who played a game released since Firaxis' XCOM or XCOM 2. Otherwise, Phoenix Point strikes off on its own path. It's a world of weird fiction monsters, heroic sci-fi soldiers, and the body horror they share. It has some wonderful visual design and well-established, consistent aesthetics throughout for a creepy and atmospheric ride. It's never quite clear where the worldbuilding is taking you next – and it goes to some wonderfully weird places.

The sound design and music, on the other hand, are bad. They actively undercut everything the graphics accomplish. Some of the voice lines sound like they were recorded inside a tin can.

But most of the time I didn't care at all. Phoenix Point's campaign does fascinating things, centring core tensions you can never easily solve.

Beginning with an aircraft and a handful of soldiers at a single remote base, you uncover the landscape of the ruined world and take on its problems. Exploring is key, as you need to quickly find and reactivate old Phoenix Project bases to expand your capabilities – as well as caches of supplies and missions to do. As you stretch out you encounter factions of people divided into Havens, fortified settlements of a few thousand.

WHAT IS IT?

Turn-based tactics against a tide of fishmen

You quickly realise that over 99 per cent of Earth's human population is gone. Now mists are rising from the oceans to claim the rest.

To save them you'll have to pick sides. A few neutral Havens aside, the three human factions generally hate each other. New Jericho's billionaire leader wants to cleanse the world with fire. The Disciples of Anu worship mutation and want to leave humanity behind. Synedrion can't decide if they're an autonomous collective or an anarcho-syndicalist commune.

That's probably fine, because the tension on the strategic level is absolutely electric. You're always strapped for resources, deciding whether to send out an exploration team or hold them back to defend threatened Havens. It's a series of ever-more-vicious choices where expanding your own capabilities in the long term means deciding that Havens will fall in the short term.

SLOG DAYS

Despite this frantic action, the overall path of the campaign is meandering. Figuring out how to progress takes a lot of swinging in the dark hoping some strategy lands. That's a slog in the mid-section of the campaign as you grind through missions looking for direction.

But the tactical battles only lag through pure repetition, not out of a lack of interesting toys to play with. There are six classes, each with unique abilities and equipment. Each soldier also has three stats: Strength for HP and inventory, Speed for movement, and Willpower for morale. Stats and powers are simple, but spending points to advance is rife with hard decisions. Conversely, new weapons and equipment are often measured tradeoffs rather than obvious upgrades.

These tradeoffs play into the strategy you develop around your forces. Phoenix Point's tactical combat is about simulated bullets, hundreds of hit points, hit locations, overlapping fields of fire, and careful movement. A solid strategy going into the fight will always prove better than tactics turn-by-turn… mostly. The balance isn't entirely there. Willpower is spent to use abilities, a frustrating impetus to not use your cool tricks lest your team collapse into a spiral of panicking soldiers.

Your soldiers' precious action points are a resource spent in miserly increments. The semi-realistic ballistic physics model each shot rather than binary hit or miss attack rolls. You can automate shooting or take direct control and aim it yourself. It seems like a gimmick, but it really won me over.

SIRENS' CALL

A real highlight are the minibosses, Sirens, who are both heavily armoured and can mind-control. I loved every time one appeared, throwing the tactical situation into chaos as I both managed existing enemies and mitigated the new threat. The boss fights against the huge Scylla fall flat though. They should be tactically interesting, as they boast all kinds of powers, but are actually just about pouring every bullet you have into one large thing.

Undercutting all the cool design is the combat AI. It's competent at best, but at least once a fight downright broken. It fails at simple, vital tasks like setting up effective overwatch fire – sometimes directly away from you or into a wall. Phoenix Point also hangs during enemy turns, sometimes for as much as a minute, before deciding what to do next. Twice during my play it hung and then never resumed.

Those two moments aside, Phoenix Point isn't broken, just buggy. I never encountered anything game-ruining, or that wasn't fixed with a reloaded save.

Despite shortcomings, Phoenix Point won me over. It's a bit of a mess, but it's a mess filled with clever ideas and idiosyncratic gameplay you won't find anywhere else. JONATHAN BOLDING

VERDICT:
Although it is strategically delicious, Phoenix Point's biggest problem is the lackluster technical execution.

7

OBJECTIVES
• KILL ALL ENEMIES
• CRATES PROTECTED [7/9]
ARTHRON
240
25
DAMAGE 0 - 40 X 10 SHOTS
Some Arthrons are so armoured that shotguns are useless. This is not one of them.
[T/G ZOOM IN/ZOOM OUT]
FIRE WEAPON
ACTION POINTS: 2
WILL POINTS: 0
Shoot at target enemy or target point

OBJECTIVES
• KILL ALL ENEMIES
• CIVILIANS ALIVE [3/5]
END TURN
Multiple mist clouds can give the enemy control of the field.
240
29
DAMIAN "KURO" FRINK
WP 4 / 8

Damage can apply to equipment or bodies equally.

Synedrion Mist Repellers are vital tech.

OBJECTIVES
• KILL ALL ENEMIES
• CIVILIANS ALIVE [3/5]
TRITON
280
17
DAMAGE 10 - 30 X 12 SHOTS
With machine guns, manual aim won't change much.
[T/G ZOOM IN/ZOOM OUT]
FIRE WEAPON
ACTION POINTS: 3
WILL POINTS: 0
Shoot at target enemy or target point
GIL "WRATH" BERGA
WP 7 / 10
DECEPTOR MG

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Tech 280

YOUR GUIDE TO PC GAMING HARDWARE.

PC PowerPlay POWER AWARD

Our Power Award is given to products that are best in class no matter your budget.

PC PowerPlay SMART BUY

Our Smart Buy Award goes to products that balance performance with price tag.

GEAR THIS ISSUE

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THE PCPP TESTBENCH

CPU INTEL I7 7700K *intel.com.au*
MOBO ASUS Z270 ROG CROSSHAIR VI HERO *asus.com.au*
RAM 2 X BALLISTIX 8GB DDR4-3200 *crucial.com*
PSU CORSAIR 850W PSU *corsair.com*
COOLING H105 CORSAIR COOLER *www.corsair.com.au*

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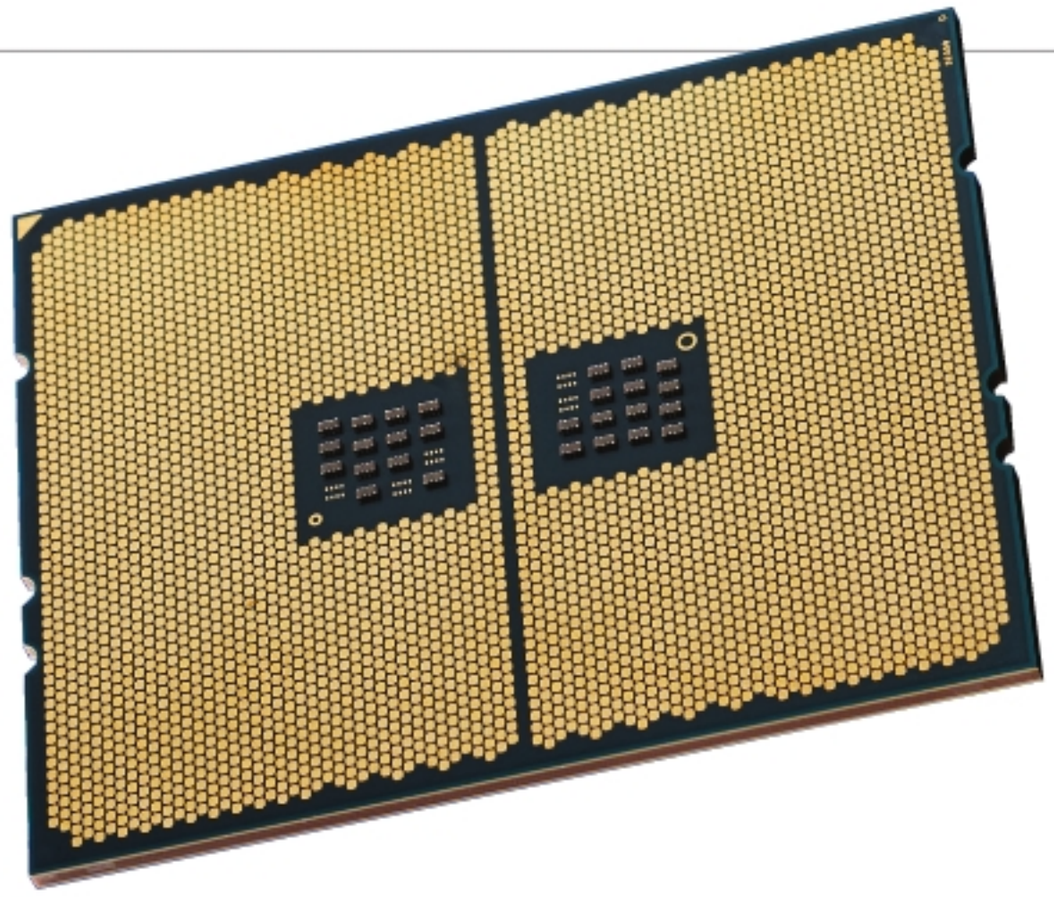

> At times, the performance of the 3970X is mind-blowing. Anyone dabbling in 3D rendering will love how fast it is.

CPU

AMD Ryzen Threadripper 3970X

Third-generation Threadripper is the new king of cores.

PRICE $3,199
www.amd.com

AMD has thrown down the gauntlet with the third round of Threadripper, delivering many of the fastest benchmark results I've ever seen.

Intel's response is telling. It slashed prices on its 10th-gen Cascade Lake-X parts. It's still not enough – at least, not if you're after maximum multithreaded performance. AMD and Intel have now swapped positions in terms of pricing, with the Threadripper 3970X occupying Intel's former three-grand slot. At least the platform and hardware justify the cost.

At times, the performance of the 3970X is mind-blowing. Anyone dabbling in 3D rendering will love how fast it is. Cinebench completes its baseline test in a matter of seconds – we remember waiting several minutes just a few years ago on some PCs. The same goes for other tools, such as Blender, Corona, and POV-ray. Other multithreaded tasks start to hit the limits of scaling, however. Video editing is faster than on a 16-core Ryzen 9 3950X, but nowhere near twice as fast. Software development with large projects should benefit, though, as should several other professional applications.

AMD's new TRX40 platform makes some noteworthy changes to help with scaling and performance. Moving the memory controller into the IO chiplet means memory access speeds should be more uniform this round. AMD also links the CPU package and chipset with a PCIe x8 connection, and upgrades the interface to PCIe Gen4, giving it four times the bandwidth between the CPU and chipset compared to other CPUs. The only potential drawback is that this means third-generation Threadripper had to ditch backward compatibility – you can't put a 3970X into an X399 motherboard.

Depending on the app and workload, 3970X is either thread and shoulders above the competition, or it occasionally stumbles. Gaming performance is mostly OK, but several games seem to get confused by the deluge of cores and threads. Far Cry 5, Metro Exodus, and Total War: Warhammer 2 all perform worse than a Ryzen 9 3950X (or even a 3900X), but seven other games we tested tied. General performance, measured by PCMark 10, is also worse than a Ryzen 9 3950X, and Handbrake H.265 1080p encoding is only 12 percent faster, despite having twice the cores to work with.

Much like Field of Dreams, we believe if you build it (Threadripper), they (apps) will come. Ten years ago, the fastest PCs had four-core CPUs. Ten years before that, the only PCs with more than a single CPU core were multisocket servers. What will PCs look like 10 years from now?

Not everyone needs a 32-core monster CPU, but if you do, AMD is pretty much the only game worth watching. AMD's Zen 2 processors are fabricated on a superior 7nm process, allowing for more cores, less power, and higher clock speeds. Intel desperately needs to get 10nm desktop parts on to the market if it wants to compete, and by the time those arrive, maybe 7nm as well.

JARRED WALTON PC

+
- Massive core-count
- Huge performance
- Seriously pro-grade

-
- Super-expensive
- Surprisingly poor game performance

VERDICT: Massive multithreaded performance; 7nm technology; innovative chiplet design.

9

	Blender 2.80 Beta BMW	Cinebench R15 Single/Multi	POV-Ray 3.7.1 Single/Multi	PCMark 10	Metro Exodus ()	Tom Clancy's The Division 2	Total War: Warhammer II
	PPS	INDEX	PPS	INDEX	FPS	FPS	FPS
AMD Threadripper 3970X	10,651	210/7,573	521/14,754	7,278	71	149	72
Intel Core i9-10980XE	5,912	204/3,799	571/9,379	7,344	87	151	82
AMD Ryzen 9 3950X	5,719	213/3,992	539/8,334	7,963	90	148	90

GROUP TEST

PC CASES

Prevent your PC components spilling all over the carpet with a stylish case.

By Alice Newcome-Beill and Terrence Mai

There are many PC cases but they all serve to house all those components you picked out. If you appreciate looks as well as performance, picking out a new case can be very exciting. Think about your components before buying: there's nothing more disappointing than spending a mint on a graphics card only to realise it won't fit into the case you've picked. Luckily there are cases for nearly any build, so you'll always have an excellent array of options.

1

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JARGON BUSTER

ATX Midrange desktop computer size, standard for motherboards and cases.

Corsair PC peripheral supplier based in Fremont, California, known for RAM products, keyboards, water-cooling systems and high-fashion tower cases.

Drive bay A space inside a computer case to install hard drives in 2.5" and 3.5" sizes. Modern motherboards have M2 drive slots as well.

E-ATX Extended ATX. Extra-large ATX size used for deluxe motherboards and cases.

ITX Tiny desktop PC size, standard used for tight spaces or boutique builds.

NZXT An American company known for cases and components, such as liquid coolers.

PSU A box-like component with cables that provides a computer with power.

USB A small hot-swappable data connector.

Cosmos C700P

COOLER MASTER **$509**

The best full tower case right now.

1 Much like the original Cooler Master Cosmos, the C700P is a hefty beast with a similarly large price tag. However, we'd argue that it's worth the expense.

A beautiful handlebar design, curved glass panel and sleek colour scheme are matched by features that'll support even the highest-end components (including E-ATX motherboards and oversized GPUs).

Cooler Master's latest manufacturing techniques are truly fancy, replacing the tubular rails of previous models with castings and putting a curve on the forward edge of its tempered glass side panel. We also see white stripes down the sides of the top panel, the bottoms of the lower rails, and around the port section, all of which contain RGB lighting. A larger footprint means you won't be pushed for space either. What's more, the RGB is subtle enough not to distract.

This is a lot to spend on an enclosure. However, those who are willing to go all out on a build will get everything they need.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Integrated RGB lighting system
- Adjustable motherboard layout
- May require PSU extension cables
- Lots of plastic

SPECS FORM FACTOR: FULL TOWER / **MOTHERBOARDS:** MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX, ATX, E-ATX (UP TO 12" X 11") / **DIMENSIONS:** 639 X 306 X 651MM / **WEIGHT:** 22.2KG / **RADIATORS:** UP TO 280MM

H710i

NZXT **$285**

The best mid-tower PC case.

2 This latest iteration of NZXT's 'smart' case brings a couple of new features to help modernise your build. This ultra-clean and uncomplicated mid-tower emphasises convenience above all, with a front panel USB-C port and the ability to vertical-mount a GPU with a separate PCIe riser.

The H710i features integrated RGB lighting around the tempered glass side panel, controlled by the NZXT CAM software and a built-in LED lighting hub that allows for easy control of RGB lighting and fan speeds as well. To keep things cool, it features ventilation gutters that run the perimeter of each side, aided by the four 120mm fans included in the box.

Cable routing is where the H710i really shines, thanks to a large aluminium slat that allows you to route your cables into channels on the back. This keeps everything clean and uncluttered, and built-in velcro straps hold it all down. It's an easy alternative to the rubber gasket solution found on other mid-towers.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Integrated addressable LED lighting
- CAM powered "smart device"
- Vertical GPU mount
- Cramped HDD space

SPECS FORM FACTOR: MID TOWER / **MOTHERBOARDS:** MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX, ATX, E-ATX (UP TO 10.7") / **DIMENSIONS:** 230 X 516 X 494MM / **WEIGHT:** 12.3 KG / **DRIVE BAYS:** 2.5": 7, 3.5": 4

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H200i

NZXT **$159**

The best mini-ITX PC case.

3 NZXT's H200i is essentially a miniature version of the H710i. It's all about packing a high-end system into a compact, minimalistic package.

Like its bigger brother, the case comes equipped with NZXT's smart hub and also includes two fans and one RGB LED strip. With plentiful support for liquid cooling and full-sized components, the H200i is the perfect compromise between smaller ITX builds and larger mid-sized towers.

The H200i ditches any USB 2.0 ports, leaving just a pair of USB 3.0 ports and the standard front audio jacks. Readers hoping a USB-C port might replace the missing USB 2.0 ports will be sadly disappointed.

A removable 2.5-inch SSD mounting bracket sits on the exposed side of the power supply shroud. There's also a metal bar running from top to bottom for cable management, which can support a 160mm-tall tube reservoir if you're in to DIY liquid cooling.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Excellent cooling support
- Pre-installed addressable RGB
- Integrated CAM smart device
- Airflow isn't too great

SPECS FORM FACTOR: MINI-ITX TOWER / **MOTHERBOARDS:** MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX / **DIMENSIONS:** 210 X 349 X 372MM / **WEIGHT:** 6 KG / **RADIATORS:** UP TO 240MM / **I/O:** 1 X AUDIO/MIC, 2 X USB 3.1 GEN 1 / **DRIVE BAYS:** 2.5": 4, 3.5": 1

Carbide 275R

CORSAIR **$129**

The best budget PC case.

4 One of Corsair's newest cases, the Carbide 275R might just be the ultimate minimalist's case. Aside from a small 'sail' logo on the front panel, the 275R ditches additional branding for the sake of a clean design for the style-obsessed. While the design may be minimal, the functionality is anything but.

Unlike NZXT's minimal S340, the Carbide 275R can support a 360mm radiator in the front and up to six 120mm fans. With a modest price tag, the 275R is a great case for beginners as well as advanced users looking to create a sleek custom loop.

Painted black to match the exterior, the interior of the Carbide 275R is rather spacious for a mid-tower ATX case. There are two large cable pass-through holes with rubber grommets in the motherboard tray and one in the top of the PSU tunnel. The hole at the upper left hand edge of the motherboard tray is specifically designed for routing fan cables and the ATX12V/ EPS12V power cable.

PC PowerPlay VERDICT

- Minimal branding
- Full-length dust filters
- Great cooling support
- Lacking cable management space

SPECS FORM FACTOR: MID TOWER / **MOTHERBOARDS:** MINI-ITX, MICRO-ATX, ATX / **DIMENSIONS:** 460 X 211 X 455MM / **WEIGHT:** 10.14KG / **RADIATORS:** UP TO 360MM / **I/O:** 1 X AUDIO/MIC, 2 X USB 3.0 / **DRIVE BAYS:** 2.5": 3, 3.5": 2

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Obsidian 1000D

CORSAIR **$699**

The best high-end PC case.

5 The Corsair Obsidian 1000D is a behemoth of a PC case that is ready to house the biggest and baddest systems. Standing tall at a staggering 695mm, this 'super tower' features enough space to have 18 fans and up to four massive radiators installed at the same time.

In addition to the stellar cooling support, the 1000D features a unique triple-chamber design with convenient storage compartments and telescoping radiator trays for easy installation.

Of course there is also an RGB lit front panel I/O with built-in smart lighting and fan control courtesy of Corsair's built-in Commander Pro controller. Build in two systems, and each gets its own front panel controls.

The Obsidian 1000D is massive, and meant to pack as much hardware as possible into its monstrous-yet-elegant chassis. The Obsidian 900D was long the top choice for over-the-top builds and it's only fitting the 1000D has come along to knock it off its throne.

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

- Supports just about any crazy build
- Can house E-ATX Mini-ITX together
- Dual 480mm front radiators
- Expensive

SPECS FORM FACTOR: SUPER TOWER / **MOTHERBOARDS:** ATX, E-ATX, MINI-ITX, SSI EEB, MICROATX / **DIMENSIONS:** 695 X 307 X 693MM / **WEIGHT:** 29.5 KG / **DRIVE BAYS:** 2.5":6, 3.5":5

Dark Base Pro 900

BE QUIET! **$369**

The best case for modders.

6 Originally known for its silent power supplies and fans, Be Quiet! entered the case market with a big splash and has done quite well in the short period of time since its first case launch in 2014. One of its newer cases, the Dark Base Pro 900 remains one of our highly recommended full towers thanks to its sleek design and enthusiast-friendly interior.

The case is large enough for the biggest motherboards and radiators up to 420mm in size. The case also features total modularity with options for an inverted motherboard layout and even some nifty features such as wireless Qi charging and preinstalled LED lighting.

The water cooling support provides vast options. If you want complete control over the configuration of your build, consider this chassis. But even with such good performance, it's hard to justify the price for this pro version. Buyers who want neither the glass nor the Qi charger will find better value in the non-pro Dark Base 900.

PC PowerPlay **VERDICT**

- Highly modular
- Wireless Qi charger
- Extensive cooling support
- Expensive

SPECS FORM FACTOR: FULL TOWER / **MOTHERBOARDS:** E-ATX, XL-ATX, ATX, M-ATX, MINI-ITX / **DIMENSIONS:** 577 X 243 X 586MM / **WEIGHT:** 14.39 KG / **RADIATORS:** UP TO 420MM / **DRIVE BAYS:** 2.5":10, 3.5":5

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GRAPHICS CARD

Sapphire Pulse RX 5600 XT 6G

Is this the best $500 graphics card right now?

PRICE $485
www.sapphiretech.com

Gamers have had a lot of reading to do to help them determine the best graphics cards to buy in the mid-range market. The last few months has seen the release of Nvidia's 1600-series Super cards, AMD's RX 5500 XT and now we have another disruptive entry to add to the mix, the RX 5600 XT. The 5600 XT is a very interesting card indeed, and one that AMD believes is the one that can cause arguably the biggest mid-range realignment of this generation. Let's see if it holds up to this promise.

The RX 5600 XT is equipped with the Navi 10 GPU, with clock speeds and the memory spec being the primary differences between it and the more expensive RX 5700. Both cards include 2,304 shader processors. Strangely, AMD decided to equip the 5600 XT with 6GB of RAM, an odd choice given the lower tier 5500 XT ships with 8GB, not to mention that next generation consoles will have 8GB. Will 6GB be enough for uncompromised 1080P gaming in, say, two years? We'll have to wait and see.

AMD made the 11th hour call to increase the 5600 XT's clock speeds, likely in response to Nvida's revised RTX 2060 pricing. But leaving BIOS flashing to end users is a haphazard decision at best, and is a risky strategy from AMD. Obviously AMD really didn't want to drop the price. We tested with the new BIOS, specifically the performance version as the silent one gives up too much performance for limited gain.

We have Sapphire's Pulse RX 5600 XT on hand. Pulse cards are Sapphire's mid-tier products, above the basic reference cards, and below the Nitro series cards. It comes with dual BIOS', but there isn't much point to using the silent BIOS given how quiet the card is anyway. It's an attractive and very well built card. Do note that it's essentially a triple slot card.

AMD is positioning the 5600 XT as the ultimate 1080p card, and the performance results back that up. The new BIOS pushes it ahead of the RTX 2060, and therefore the entire 1660 series. We were also very impressed with Sapphire's cooler. The card remained essentially silent at all times. We never saw temperatures go higher than 70c, meaning the card was able to maintain impressive boost clocks in the 1,720MHz range for long periods. In fact with the silent running levels, we wouldn't even bother with the silent BIOS as you'll lose too much performance for no apparent advantage apart from saving a few watts.

Sapphire's Pulse RX 5600 XT is a very impressive and aggressively priced 5600 XT. With its newly boosted clock speeds, it's highly competitive with Nvidia's offerings. It beats the RTX 2060 on price and performance, while remaining quiet with good thermals and power consumption levels. We really wish it had 8GB for that extra bit of future proofing. 8GB also looks better on the box to uninformed buyers. If you've got $500 to drop on a graphics card right now, and don't care about the RTX feature set, then the 5600 XT is the card to get.
CHRIS SZEWCZYK PC

+
- Very quiet
- Runs cool
- Aggressive pricing

-
- Could use more RAM

VERDICT: **The RX 5600 XT is very competitive in its price range but we wish AMD had included 8GB of RAM**

8

Indictaes Best Result

	Ghost Recon Wildlands (Very High Preset)	Metro: Exodus (Ultra Preset)	Shadow of the Tomb Raider (Highest)	3DMark
	1920x1080 Avg	1920x1080 Avg	1920x1080 Avg	Time Spy Score
AMD Radeon RX 5700 XT	105.0	69.1	114	9165
Nvidia GeForce GTX 1660 Super	77.9	42.7	76	6423
Nvidia GeForce RTX 2060	91.4	54.1	92	7932
Sapphire Pulse Radeon RX 5600 XT (Perf BIOS)	91.4	59.2	96	8128

GAMING MONITOR

Samsung C27RG5

A 27-inch, 240Hz, G-Sync curved gaming monitor that has competitive gamers in its crosshairs.

PRICE $429
samsung.com

Back in the January issue of APC we took a look at how faster monitors have been shown to significantly improve response times in fast paced games like competitive first person shooters. In addition to displaying opponents faster, it also helps players track targets and reduces distracting artifacts like ghosting and screen tearing, in what adds up to a 90% better kill-to-death ratio for anyone using screens faster than 180fps.

Doubling your performance is a metric that any serious gamer is likely to take note of, so Samsung's new 27-inch curved gaming monitor is worth consideration from anyone looking to improve their gaming performance. Obviously the most notable feature of this screen is the 240Hz refresh rate – a speed that means there's only a handful of monitors available locally that really compete with it. Generally you pay a premium for cutting edge gaming tech, so we're not surprised the average lowest price for comparable monitors from Asus, MSI, Gigabyte and BenQ is $681. Samsung on the other hand, is selling its C27RG5 for a RRP of $429 and we've seen it going for as little as $389.

You might think that the 43% discount here means you'll have to sacrifice in some areas, but Samsung's 27-inch 240Hz monitor is bigger than most of the 24-inch competition, offers proprietary Nvidia G-Sync compatibility and has a considerably larger 3000:1 contrast ratio. The price and vibrancy are down to Samsung's use of VA panels rather than TN technology, and while on most fronts it's an improvement it does come with one downside; a 4ms response time. For most people the difference between 4ms and 1ms will be imperceivable and saving $300 by sacrificing here is a no-brainer, but for those that actually get paid to play games, this is potentially a hair worth splitting. Then again if you look at overall input lag the C27R5 was actually the fastest monitor that Tom's Hardware had on file with a PC to screen rendering lag of just 18ms.

The C27RG5 runs at a max resolution of 1,920 by 1,080 pixels, which makes sense when you consider a Nvidia GTX 2080 Super will only get 144fps averages on 1080p Ultra graphical settings in Call of Duty Modern Warfare (2019). So you'll probably need to dial down the graphical quality a little in order to make the most of this display. Samsung reports a typical brightness of 300nits which is similar to the competition, but VA panels have much better viewing angles than anything you can get using a TN screen.

The screen is nearly bezelless on the top three sides and has a conveniently placed menu control on the bottom centre edge. The display won't need any colour calibration if you use the DisplayPort 1.2 input, however you may need to cycle through a few colour and black level preserts if you intend on using one of the two HDMI 2.0 inputs. We were a little disappointed that there was no Thunderbolt/ USB 3.1 input, but this was the only negative thing we really had to say about the C27RG5. .

JOEL BURGESS PC

+
- Great VA panel
- Good price for the spec
- Excellent colour.

-
- A little lacking connectivity.

VERDICT: **The fastest VA gaming panel we've tested offering better colour at a much better price.**

9

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DESKTOP PC

Alienware Aurora R9

A stylish foundation for the next generation of gaming.

PRICE $3,299
www.xxx

The Alienware Aurora R9 is dignified. That's the most fitting description I can come up with. There's a confidence to its reserved yet eye-catching shell, and it's a welcome departure from the RGB love-ins that dominate many of the best gaming PCs. It doesn't feel too excessively priced, either; there's a model to suit most budgets, be it a fun, entry-to-mid-level machine or a ray tracing monster capable of ultra settings. It's all very grown up, in other words – this is a solid foundation for the next generation of games waiting around the corner.

The Alienware Aurora R9 is a sensible piece of kit. Whether it's easy-to-reach ports at the front and plenty more at the back (including the usual DP, HDMI, ethernet, and SuperSpeed USB suspects) or sliding locks to make opening it more straightforward, this PC opts for practicality over showiness.

The most pragmatic of its features would be that scooped-out front, though. Besides giving the R9 a distinctive look, this is also where (some of) the system's vents are located - you'll hear the fans behind them whirr into life if you activate the overclocking mode.

There's no shortage of choice when it comes to the insides of an Alienware Aurora R9, either. You can go as powerful as you like or opt for something kinder on your wallet instead. That includes a budget option with an i5 processor and 1660 graphics card or a world-beating goliath that costs thousands.

Ours was toward the upper end of the scale. It featured a 9th-gen Intel i7-9700K CPU, Nvidia Geforce RTX 2070 Super GPU, 16GB Dual Channel HyperX Fury DDR4 RAM, a 512GB NVMe SSD and 2TB SATA HDD. This was more than enough to play current games on ultra settings. Though without taking the machine apart, one eyebrow-raiser here is not knowing quite what the mobo and power supply are up to and of what heritage they come from. However, this never gave cause for concern, just something to note for those who like to know as much as possible about the innards of their gaming machine.

> "There's no shortage of choice when it comes to the insides of an Alienware Aurora R9, either. You can go as powerful as you like or opt for something kinder on your wallet instead."

DESIGN

That isn't to say it's dull to look at, however. The lack of sharp edges, glass, and multi-colored pomp give the R9 a more mature, premium feel. This rig opts for something softer, leaning on rounded curves and a simple matte plastic shell instead (this is a new era of Alienware design that's labeled 'Legend').

Until you get to the front, anyway. There, the chassis falls inward to meet a strip of shiny black that houses the power button (the Alienware logo, in this case) and a handful of ports. This elevates what could otherwise have been a plain approach. It's an

eye-catching statement piece that stands out amongst the towers of today. And although you're paying extra for premium building materials, labor, and the Alienware name, at least you know you've got a quality piece of kit with all the hard work taken care of.

Taste in design is far from static, though. And I can't help but wonder how well this distinctive look will age; it strikes me as something that may seem clunky and ugly a few years down the line, despite the subtle and attractive accentuation the limited RGB lighting does offer.

PERFORMANCE

Generally speaking, the Alienware R9 breezed through each of the demanding benchmarks we set and made light work of the games we put through its grinder. A particular highlight was how easily it deals with hefty firefights in The Division 2, for example. There was no drop in framerate – a steady rate of 93fps at 1080p resolution on Ultra is excellent – and everything was rendered beautifully from start to finish, even with multiple enemies popping off shots in the games's complex and gorgeously-lit environment. Meanwhile, Total War: Warhammer 2 managed enormous, processor-heavy battles on ultra settings without batting an eyelid. The R9's benchmarks in Metro Exodus were equally impressive, suggesting that you'll be in good stead for ray tracing games if you pick up a system with our review copy's specs. It's PC gaming at its best.

> Our 2070 R9 didn't do so well in Metro on Extreme settings, dipping well below 30fps at both 1080p and 1440p. That's where more expensive builds will come in handy.

Well, nearly; our 2070 R9 didn't do so well in Metro on Extreme settings, dipping well below 30fps at both 1080p and 1440p. That's where more expensive builds will come in handy.

The in-game performance you'll get from this machine will, naturally, be closely tied to the component and makeup choices you go for in your machine, but one thing you can rely on is Alienware's dedicated software. It features dedicated overclocking and thermal checks to help you get the most out of your machine, not to mention adjustments that can be made to every part of Alienware's mice and keyboards.

Those fans aren't offensively loud even when engaged, either – I was pleasantly surprised. Not that I needed them much. The R9 handled everything exceptionally well as-is.

OVERALL

With all this in mind, we wouldn't hesitate to recommend the R9, and our particular build that we tested. It future-proofs you to a certain extent – at least for the next couple of years – and provides a first step into ray tracing. You can always swap out components further down the line if you want to add the best graphics cards or the best RAM for gaming, too.

As for the R9 range in general? Although there's always a premium thrown in for Alienware products, I was impressed by the variety of possible setups on offer. Better still, a distinctive design helps it stand out from the crowd. It's a bold new start, in other words. PC

+
- Subtle and stylish design
- Scooped-out front
- Broad range of configurations

–
- How well will the design age?
- Can get expensive quickly

VERDICT: **An elegant design and a range of options for every gamer - though you do pay for the brand.**

8

GAMING HEADSET

Turtle Beach Recon 200

Turtle Beach's $90 Recon 200 looks nice on paper, but how good is it in reality?

PRICE $89
Au.turtlebeach.com

Turtle Beach is enjoying a bit of a renaissance at the moment with its headset lineup as it courts esports professionals. Its latest budget option is the Recon 200, which feels deceptively high-quality. The headset is listed with compatibility for Xbox One, PlayStation 4 (PS4), Nintendo Switch and mobile devices, but in testing we found that it works perfectly well with PC as well, when set in Xbox mode.

What stood out to me immediately was the really nice design. It uses a lot of the same techniques found in Turtle Beach's previous lineup, including the flip-to-mute fixed microphone, and diagonal pivots on the cups, but the company has included this subtle, sexy carbon fiber-style two-tone finish, which looks great. The headband is also supported on the interior with a strip of brushed metal, which compliments the matte black tones and gunmetal accents found throughout. I really like this more serious Turtle Beach design and hope the company continues with it in the future.

The Recon 200 also doesn't disappoint in the sound department, delivering rich bass notes and crisp sound effects, elevated with surround software like Dolby Atmos and Windows Sonic. While the soundscape doesn't offer the same clarity and distinct tuning found in some of Turtle Beach's more expensive headsets, like the Elite Atlas, it still defies its price point to deliver high-quality sound, with amplified volume and bass, owing to that internal battery. The mic quality is good enough for comms chatter but don't expect any miracles for podcasting or content creation.

I'm not a fan of the faux leather-style earcups, particularly on lower-end headsets. The lack of cool-feeling materials and foam in the earcups can make them quite clammy over time, even in a cold climate.

Also, I found them to be a tad tight across the top of my head. The cushion at the top isn't very thick at all, making them feel a little harsh to wear, particularly if you're sensitive to that sort of thing. Overall, they are comfortable, but they could certainly be better.

If you're looking specifically for a $90 headset, I'd say this is a great purchase, particularly if you value the mic monitoring aspect. The Recon 200 is cheap and it punches above its weight in the audio department, delivering great sound across both PC and Xbox One. The two-tone carbon fiber design looks great, and robust materials, complimented with metal interiors, should see this headset survive a lot of punishment.

> "The Recon 200 also doesn't disappoint in the sound department."

While I would have preferred fabric earcups and thicker cushioning across the top of the headset, it's by no means what I'd call bad, especially for younger gamers who won't need to use the Recon 200 on its largest adjustment setting.

Overall, this is a headset that won't disappoint. You could spend a little bit more to get better audio and comfort, but the addition of mic monitoring makes this headset a cut above many others in the price range.

JEZ CORDEN PC

+
- Robust construction with metal interior
- Comfortable cushioning
- Flip-to-mute mic

–
- Leatherette earcups are a bit clammy
- A little tight across the top

VERDICT: **For $90 you could do far worse in the audio department, and the addition of mic monitoring is a nice touch.**

8

GAMING HEADSET

Razer Kraken Ultimate

Some iconic cans get the luxury treatment – and they're worth the extra outlay.

PRICE $229
http://razer.com

The lime green glow and marketing hyperbole of Razer's peripherals have been around since the earth's mantle first cooled and simple lifeforms began appearing. The Boomslang mouse was there at the turn of the millennium, when we first got interested in playing games against other people, live, on the Internet, and it remains as iconic as it is preposterously named.

Since those early days in the gaming peripherals market, the competition's heated up considerably, but Razer remains a big player thanks not just to quality mice, keyboards, and audio gear, but marketing and really, really fancy packaging. So, it's no surprise to see the $229 Kraken Ultimate headset arrive in a box covered in spot UV treatment and pithy slogans such as "Make sound your weapon." If anything, it's slightly disappointing not to be welcomed to "the cult of Razer" by the inner packaging, as the pre-Ultimate iterations of its headsets used to do, but we'll work past it. Its packaging is smartly presented; this is what we're trying to say.

So, too, is the headset itself, resplendent with an underglow of RGB around both earcups and a bright RGB Razer logo in the center of each one. Good-quality artificial leather surrounds two very generous memory foam pads around the contact points, and while the memory foam is actually quite thin under the headband, it's still very comfortable thanks to the band's broad dimensions. A Razer logo lies imprinted on the top of the headband, also finished in artificial leather, while an aluminum frame holds the whole unit together. At just under 400 grams, it's not going for the featherweight category, but as silly as it may sound, it feels like a light 400 grams when it's on your head. The cushioning is ample for glasses-wearers to maintain their spectacles while playing, and although this reviewer still prefers SteelSeries's ski-goggle headband design for long-term comfort, the Kraken is still up to the task when it comes to marathon sessions.

EXTRAS ORDINARY

For a model bearing the "Ultimate" nomenclature, it's a relatively barebones package – one 2m braided cable connects the headset to your PC via USB, and with no inline remote, the only controls are a volume wheel on the rear of the left earcup and a toggle switch for surround sound (don't bother) just above it. The mic mute switch is placed right on the mic itself, and a red light band clicks on when you do mute it. It's here where our only real misgivings lie – this is an expensive headset, and it's not working very hard to entice you with added extras.

Let's get to the heart of the matter: These cans sound incredible. For a long time, "50mm drivers" was marketing talk for "too much bass," but the custom-tuned neodymium 50mm monsters here have insane levels of clarity, which simply aren't diminished by all the low end. It's a brilliantly tuned tone, unsuitable for monitoring audio recording and the like – but that was never the point.

PHIL IWANIUK PC

+
- Booming low end
- Incredible clarity
- Smart design

–
- Short cable
- Awkward mic muting

VERDICT: **Load up a game with explosions, crashes, gunfire, and/or raised voices, and there's no way you'll be disappointed.**

9

GAMING KEYBOARD

SteelSeries Apex 3

The SteelSeries Apex 3 will get the job done.

PRICE $119
www.steelseries.com

The SteelSeries Apex 3 is part of the Danish manufacturer's new lineup of budget-friendly gaming gear. This membrane keyboard sounds good on paper, with a reasonable price, RGB lighting, water resistance and an included wrist rest. But, like most membrane keyboards, it's simply not that comfortable for either typing or gaming, and most of its features feel half-baked.

Granted, no one should expect a top-of-the-line gaming keyboard at this price point, and I understand how the Apex 3 could be a good stepping stone for young, cash-strapped gamers who want some of the bells and whistles of a higher-end device. Comparable mechanical keyboards tend to cost between $100 and $120 – but if possible, I'd still recommend saving up for one of those. The Apex 3 will get the job done, but a cheap office keyboard would serve almost as well – and a mechanical-gaming keyboard would serve much better.

As the keyboard is a little on the small side, there's not much room for extra keys. In the upper-right corner, there's a volume dial (very handy) and a "multimedia button," which can theoretically play, pause and skip songs, depending on how many times you press it in rapid succession. In my tests, though, I couldn't get the button to do anything, even after updating the firmware and trying it out with different media players. However, SteelSeries tried to replicate my issue on a variety of machines, and wasn't able to, so this could be an issue unique to my system. Either way, the multimedia button is nice to have, but it isn't a make-or-break feature.

I compared the typing experience on the SteelSeries Apex 3 with cheap membrane keyboards from Dell and Microsoft; the Apex 3 was actually a little more difficult to use. The keys are workable, sure, but they feel stiff at first, and mushy once depressed.

The Apex 3 performed well in-game, from zipping around the battlefield in Overwatch to building up an army in Age of Empires II: Definitive Edition. Comfort aside, the keys were responsive and never missed one of my commands. The device is also suitable for a wide variety of games, since you can program macros and assign them to lesser-used keys.

One quibble, however, is that the Apex 3 doesn't offer a "game mode," which many comparable models do. These modes disable the Windows key, Alt + Tab and similar commands, so that you'll never accidentally minimise a game window in the middle of a heated session.

> No one should expect a top-of-the-line gaming keyboard at this price point.

It's usually one of the big reasons to buy a gaming keyboard over an office model, so its absence here is disappointing.

The Apex 3 isn't the kind of keyboard I'd buy. The keys don't feel great, it doesn't have many extra features, and the lighting isn't very pretty. But for the price, it does what it's supposed to. In the same price range, you could consider the Razer Cynosa, which has better lighting and somewhat more comprehensive software. But, if you can save for a mechanical selection from our best gaming keyboards instead, that'd be my primary recommendation.

MARSHALL HONOROF PC

+
- Inexpensive
- Reprogrammable keys
- Water-resistant

–
- Unsatisfying keystrokes
- No game mode
- Disappointing lighting

VERDICT: **The SteelSeries Apex 3 will get the job done, but a cheap office keyboard would serve almost as well.**

7

GAMING KEYBOARD

Corsair K95 RGB Platinum XT

Fully loaded doesn't begin to cover it.

PRICE $299
www.corsair.com

Damn, this keyboard is terrible. The feet fold out sideways. That's vaguely neat from an aesthetic point of view, but the slightest lateral movement causes it to crumple to the deck with a whimper. Don't use the feet. They're really bad, and Corsair's engineers should flagellate themselves for designing them. Whether they choose to break out the birch twigs before or after they receive the plaudits for the rest of this keyboard is up to them. Damn, this keyboard is great.

The K95 Platinum XT is an obvious evolution of Corsair's tried-and-true overall design, which sees a cleverly folded aluminum base frame forming a neat dished base for the keyboard, with a distinct forehead and tiny, functional chin. Everything that isn't core keyboard (and there's a lot of that) has its own tactile distinguishing feature: the easy-to-find ridged buttons of the media cluster; the physically separated profile, lighting, and lock controls; the knurled, slick volume roller; and the macro column, which deserves further dissection.

Dedicated macro keys are divisive at best and a disaster at worst, particularly for those who locate their left hand by the feel of the left edge of the keys. Corsair has solved this problem: Not only are these keys colored differently, they're strongly textured, and they're contoured in the opposite direction from the Tab column – we didn't once, in a two-week testing period, accidentally hit G6 instead of Left Ctrl, and that's about the most ringing endorsement you're likely to find.

You have three options in terms of switches, one clicky (Cherry MX Blue) and two quiet: Cherry's luxurious Brown variety, or the Speed Silver variant tested here, the latter of which appears to be your only option if you pick up the alternate gunmetal finish. Switch performance is often very subjective. We've tried keyboards in which Speed Silver switches just didn't feel right, but Corsair has found the balance. There's a minimum of spring ring, and the rigidity of the base (and high actuation point of the switches) makes every keypress sharp and fast. Could the top of the keycaps be a micron smaller to prevent fat-fingered mispresses? Sure.

The "RGB" part of the name is so strong it deserves to be in 72-point bold. Per-key lighting burns through each keycap, and glows wonderfully in the gaps and through the clear bases of the switches. It's a feast for the eyes, made even more impressive by the 19-zone light bar along the rear, which beams color everywhere. Rainbow vomit isn't to everyone's taste, but this is equally capable of being subtle, and easily configured through Corsair's iCUE driver, and subsequently stored as one of five on-board profiles. Even the little extras hit the mark.

It's a strong, strong package, and we have no doubt that it'll be resilient enough to last a great many years. That's handy, because damn, this keyboard is so expensive.

ALEX COX PC

+
- Feature-packed
- Great key feel
- Tons of well-executed extras

–
- Terrible feet
- Pricey

VERDICT: **It's worth it, but it's not the only great keyboard in the world.**

9

GAMING MOUSE

SteelSeries Rival 3

With good performance for just $70, the Rival 3 is a highly recommended budget mouse.

PRICE $69
www.steelseries.com

SteelSeries newest entry-level gaming mouse only costs $70, which is roughly half of what many people would expect to spend on a gaming mouse. That low price comes with RGB, acceptable performance with gaming as well as productivity and fewer limitations that you might expect.

But if you find cable drag annoying or are seeking the best gaming mouse around, this budget peripheral won't be enough.

The Rival 3 looks a lot like the SteelSeries Sensei Ten released in late 2019. There are some important differences – especially the Rival 3's lack of side buttons on its right casing – but it would be easy to tell they were made by the same company even if they didn't feature the SteelSeries logo. Basically, the Rival 3 looks like a smaller take on the Sensei Ten.

The Rival 3 measures 4.75 inches long, 2.3 inches wide in the front, 2.64 inches wide in the back and is 0.85 inches tall in the front and 1.49 inches tall in the back. It weighs 2.7 ounces, and if it were any smaller, it would feel like a toy.

SteelSeries equipped the Rival 3 with six buttons: the left mouse button, right mouse button, two side buttons, a scroll click button and a DPI switch. That should be plenty for most people, especially since the buttons are customizable via the SteelSeries Engine 3 software available for Windows and macOS (more about customization in a bit).

The Rival 3 is light enough to use for extended periods but not so light that it's easy to accidentally fling it across your mouse pad. The mouse fit my smaller hand well (more so than the DeathAdder V2), and my palm grip always felt good. Unlike the DeathAdder V2's sandpaper-like side texture, the Rival 3's casing didn't irritate me during longer gaming sessions.

I enjoyed using the Rival 3 in my usual rotation of first-person shooters (Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, Apex Legends and Overwatch) and didn't experience any tracking-related issues with the CPI set to 1,600 or 2,000. Swapping between those settings in the heat of the moment is slightly difficult, thanks to the small DPI switch, but doable.

It's hard to believe the SteelSeries Rival 3 only costs $30. Is it the most solidly built gaming mouse on the market? No. It's not the most customizable mouse, either, nor the best performing. Anyone who's looking for the best of the best shouldn't waste a second glance on the Rival 3.

For everyone else, however, it's easy to recommend the Rival 3. It performs well despite having a limited CPI range, offers some customization options via SteelSeries Engine 3 and has attractive RGB lighting that would be hard to find on similarly priced gaming mice. It's also comfortable to use.

> "The Rival 3 is light enough to use for extended periods."

My only wish would be for SteelSeries to ditch the RGB lighting and include a braided cable instead. Yes, that would make the Rival 3 look less distinctive, but it would also improve in-game performance.

NATHANIEL MOTT PC

+
- Low price
- Solid performance
- Distinctive RGB lighting

–
- Non-braided USB cables can be frustrating

VERDICT: **If you're willing to overlook a less-than-stellar cable, you'd be hard-pressed to find a better entry-level gaming mouse than the SteelSeries Rival 3.**

9

GAMING MOUSE

Roccat Kain 202 AIMO

Wireless wonder.

PRICE $109
http://roccat.org

Oh, to be a fly on the wall in the meeting room where this mouse was first pitched. What does a mouse do—some disruptive but well-liked marketing wunderkind asks—if not just point and click? What if we just focused really hard on that part? What if – at this point, the marketing guy sweeps his hands around dramatically – we created the perfect click?

This scenario is, of course, fantastical. But the Roccat website claims that the Kain did take two years of brainstorming, redesigns, and rigorous testing, and then goes on to refer to it as "our masterpiece." Well, Roccat, we'll be the judge of that.

The Kain 202 AIMO, itself a minor evolution of the Kain 200, is the physical embodiment of this reviewer's favorite Ron Swanson quote: "Never half-ass two things. Whole-ass one thing." The Kain 202 isn't complicated, and it doesn't present itself as such. This isn't a mouse for people who like lots of buttons, flashy RGB lighting, or unbelievably high DPIs. It does one thing perfectly: clicking stuff.

The Roccat Owl-Eye sensor was designed in collaboration with PixArt, so the general sensitivity is great. The DPI clocks in at 16,000, exactly what you'd expect from a high-quality gaming mouse, as is the 1,000Hz polling rate. But the true worth of the Kain 202 isn't measurable in simple statistics, you see. It's more of a sensation; using the Kain simply feels good.

The exterior coating is comfortable, with a white matte finish that is dirt-resistant and feels comfortable under the palm, even after extended use. There's no thumb rest, but that's hardly a huge problem. The surface material is grippy, ensuring that it stays firmly under your hand, even during the sweatiest online matches, and the whole unit feels robust. We didn't throw ours at a wall in a fit of gamer rage, but we reckon that if we did, the 202 could shrug it off.

Of course, the buttons are what really matter here. Roccat wasn't messing around when it came up with the "Titan Click" split button design used by the Kain series, where low-tolerance springs and optimized switch positioning make for a clicking function that is responsive and sturdy, rated by the manufacturer for 50 million clicks. The Kain's firmware also claims to process clicks up to 16ms faster than other gaming mice, and in practice, it feels latency-free—impressive, given its wireless design.

Our favorite part, though, is the scroll wheel. Again, there are no bells and whistles here; no adjustable scroll speed or wheel lock, just a rubber-topped wheel that rotates and clicks with satisfying weight. The same can't quite be said of the two side-mounted buttons, which are fine, but lack the heft of the other buttons. That's it, though: This mouse doesn't have lots of programmable buttons, so if you're a strategy or MMORPG gamer, you may want to look elsewhere.

CHRISTIAN GUYTON PC

+
- Excellent button response
- Quick and easy setup
- Good battery life

–
- Relatively feature-light for a gaming mouse
- No slot for USB dongle
- Shaped micro-USB port really sucks

VERDICT: **If you just want a high-quality wireless mouse for home use, the Kain 202 AIMO is almost perfect.**

8

"eSports is an area that attracts so many Australians from all ages and locations and is forecast by PwC to grow to be a $21 million industry locally by 2022."

Acer, eSports, and building better gaming PCs

We recently had a chance to catch up with Darren Simmons, Oceanic Managing Director, at Acer, for a chat on the state of PC gaming and the competitive hardware market.

PCPP: You've got some new Predator products coming out, but it's a much more competitive market for pre-built gaming systems than it was when the brand was first introduced - is that affecting the gaming PC business?

Darren Simmons: The gaming PC market in Australia has reached a point of maturity and there's no doubt that competition has reached an all-time high when it comes to pre-built gaming systems. Because of this, Acer has focused its efforts on continuously delivering new Predator technology to stay ahead of the curve and differentiate ourselves.

Examples of this include award winning Predator monitors, such as the Predator XB3 series that won the 2019 Red Dot Award for Product Design and improves the gaming experience for users; Acer's proprietary cooling technology AeroBlade 3D which is embedded into the Predator notebooks to allow for even greater levels of cooling, and the IceTunnel cooling system for desktops which is designed to create a powerful and specific airflow that efficiently pushes out hot internal air. All of this works together to differentiate the Predator brand in the market, offer a unique experience with added features and ensure the setup of these devices for gamers is as seamless as possible.

PCPP: That being the case, how is the Predator range faring as we come into 2020? What are some of the fresh challenges you're expecting?

DS: As the gaming hardware market is maturing in Australia and New Zealand, gamers are consistently updating their systems to ensure that they have the best and most up to date offerings. Given this refresh rate and the fact that gaming graphics are constantly changing and improving, one of the biggest considerations for us in 2020 will be how we maintain our steady market share and keep up momentum of the Predator brand. Additionally, our focus will be on consistently rolling-out new products launching in the region to keep up with industry demand and working with our partners, such as Intel, to make sure that gamers of all levels have access to the most cutting-edge technology. We're excited to be launching the X32 4K HDR Gaming Monitor, the CG552K 55in OLED Gaming Monitor, and a refresh of the Triton 500, with the products forecast to arrive in Australia in the second half of 2020.

In terms of what else is to come for Predator in 2020, we're looking forward to bringing the coveted Thronos Air gaming chair to Australia and showcase it at major gaming events such as Intel Extreme Masters (IEM) to give customers an experience that shows them first hand just how immersive gaming can be.

PCPP: eSports is obviously going from strength to strength, and Acer continues to invest heavily in the area - what are some of the benefits for Acer as a company when it comes to eSports?

> "The gaming PC market in Australia has reached a point of maturity and there's no doubt that competition has reached an all-time high when it comes to pre-built gaming systems."

DS: eSports is an extremely exciting area and one that continues to evolve. The eSports industry has a highly engaged audience and the competitiveness of the industry and demand for the best graphics and processing power has ensured we continuously look at the technology that's powering our gaming devices and how it can take gamers to new levels.

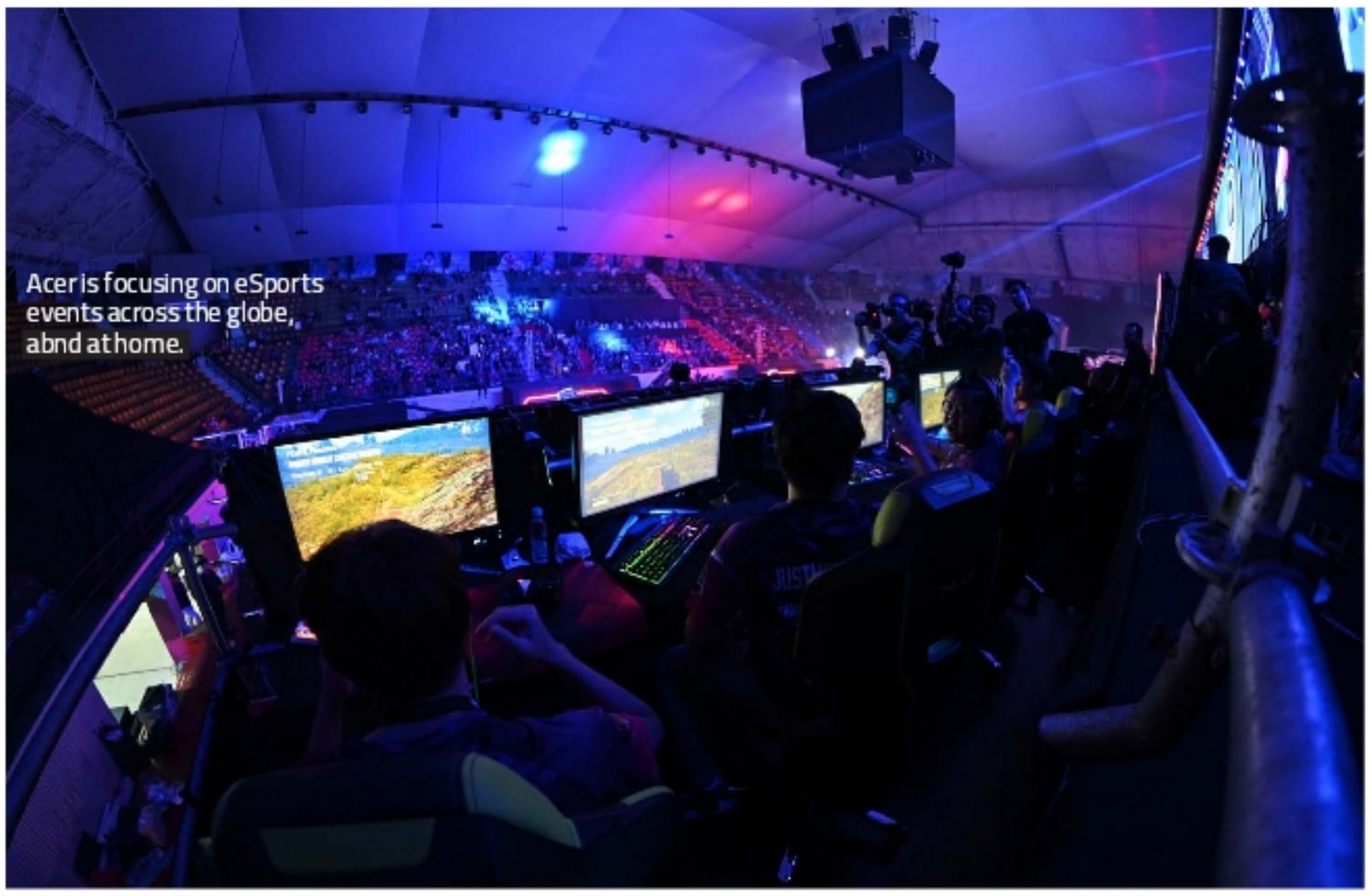
As eSports continues to rise in popularity, it is becoming much more accessible to entry level players, which has provided us with opportunities to design and develop hardware – such as the Acer Nitro range – that best serves these audiences. On the other hand, the level of professionalism taking place in the industry has also driven innovation for Acer, including the development of the Predator Thronos gaming chair which allows serious gamers to immerse themselves and have greater control over their experience.

Beyond devices, eSports has also allowed Acer to diversify into other areas and identify new opportunities to bring communities together. This can be seen particularly through our annual Predator League tournament, which gives eSports teams a platform to test their skills and compete on a regional level.

PCPP: What are some of your eSports activities in Australia? Growing eSports here continues to be quite a challenge.

DS: eSports is an area that attracts so many Australians from all ages and locations and is forecast by PwC to grow to be a $21 million industry locally by 2022. Acer has taken strides in Australia to ensure that we continue to invest in eSports, not just from a hardware perspective, but also show our support when it comes to fostering a supportive environment and giving players opportunities to grow their skills and play on the national or global stage.

One of the ways we have done this is by sponsoring the META High School Esports League, which is a program developed by the Adelaide Football Club in partnership with Riot Games that provides schools across Australia and New Zealand with the opportunity to have access to local and national leagues, training, development and eSports arenas. Not only does the program aim to drive passion for and skills in eSports among students, it also improves engagement and school attendance, and nurtures Australia's next generation of eSports champions.



Acer is focusing on eSports events across the globe, abnd at home.

Less of a gaming chair, more of a cockpit...

> Planet9 is an open eSports community that offers opportunities for amateur and casual gamers to help them level up and participate in eSports activities.

PCPP: Many of our readers already know about the Predator League, but what can you tell me about your new Planet 9 platform?

DS: Planet9 is an open eSports community that offers opportunities for amateur and casual gamers to help them level up and participate in eSports activities. The social platform launched in late 2019 and has just moved into an open beta phase. Acer has strength across hardware, software and services and we wanted to build on this and give eSports players training and mentoring opportunities by hiring a coach to give individual guidance or play alongside veteran players, as well as connect with other gamers at their level and participate in tournaments.

One of the features we're most excited about is that gamers can see advanced game statistics to track their performance. For example, data including wins, losses, kills, deaths and items purchased are used to pair the gamer with the most ideal coach and offer insights so they can continuously improve their gameplay.

INVENTORY | THE BEST BUILD FOR EVERY BUDGET

CONTROLLERS

Sometimes you gotta go mouse + keyboardless

Xbox One Controller
$69 *microsoft.com/en-au/*

Plug and play meets comfort. Every PC needs a controller and this is the best

Steam Controller
$89.95 *store.steampowered.com*

There's a bit of a learning curve, but it's great for couch gaming

MODEM ROUTERS

For all rational budgets

BUDGET

Synology RT1900RT
$169 *synology.com*

Good performance and delightfully easy to set up and manage

Synology Router RT2600ac
$328 *synology.com*

Perfect for all but the biggest families, has unusually strong transmission strength

PREMIUM

Asus ROG Rapture GT-AC5300 Gaming Router
$695 *asus.com.au*

Super fast and future proof, this is a gaming router that takes no prisoners and offers no compromise.

LAPTOPS

Gaming on the go

BUDGET

Dell G3 15
$1,599 *www.dell.com*

8th-gen CPU and a reasonable GTX 1050 is a bargain basic gamer

PREMIUM

MSI GS75 Stealth 8SG
$4,799 *msi.com*

Now boasting RTX power!

MINI

For lounge room gaming and streaming

CPU + COOLING

Intel Core i5 7500 w/ stock cooler
$235
intel.com

MOBO

Asrock Z270M-ITX/AC Motherboard
$185
asrock.com.au

GPU

Asus DUAL-RX480-4G
$338
asus.com.au

MEMORY

16GB DDR4 Corsair Vengeance LPX
$249
corsair.com/en-au

STORAGE

Samsung SSD M.2 2280 NVMe 250G 960 EVO + 2TB HDD (any)
$169 + $50 *samsung.com/au*

CASE

Fractal Design Define S Nano
$115
fractal-design.com

PSU

SilverStone SFX Gold 500W SX500-LG
$110
Silverstone.com

SOUND

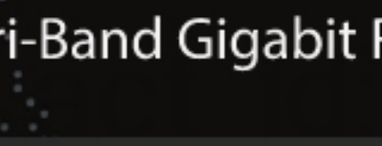
Your sound system
What you paid for it

DISPLAY

Your TV
What you paid for it

KEYBOARD

Roccat Sova
$199
www.roccat.org



MOUSE

Roccat Kone EMP
$99
www.roccat.org

TOTAL: **$1,749**

BUDGET

CPU + COOLING

AMD Ryzen 5 2600 + Wraith cooler
$235
amd.com

MOBO

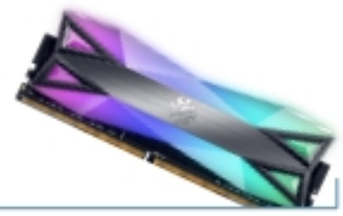
Gigabyte B450 Aorus Pro Wifi
$229
gigabyte.com.au

GPU

MSI RX 580 Gaming 8GB
$399
msi.com

MEMORY

Adata XPG Spectrix D60G
$159 *xpg.com*



STORAGE

Sandisk SSD Plus 240GB
$85 *www.sandisk.com.au*

CASE

Corsair Carbide SPEC-02 Mid Tower Gaming Case
$80 *corsair.com/en-au*

PSU

SilverStone Strider Essential 500W ST50F-ESB **$55**
silverstone.com

SOUND

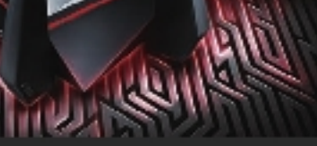
Razer Kraken X
$89
www.razer.com

DISPLAY

AOC Q3279VWFD8 75Hz Freesync 32in IPS
$299
au.aoc.com

KEYBOARD

Tesoro Tizona G2N
$49
tesorotec.com



MOUSE

Cooler Master MM530
$59
coolermaster.com

TOTAL: **$1,729**

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Wireless-AC5300
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CPU + COOLING

Intel Core i7 8700K with Noctua NH-D15 CPU Cooler

$529 + $115 *intel.com*

MOBO

Asrock Z370 Taichi

$284

asrock.com.au

GPU

MSI GeForce RTX 2070 Gaming Z 8G

$1069

au.msi.com

MEMORY

Crucial Ballistix Sport LT 4X8GB

$268

crucial.com

STORAGE

2TB HDD (any) + SAMSUNG 500GB M.2 NVMe SSD 970 EVO PLUS

$199 + $50

samsung.com/au

CASE

Fractal Define R6

$209

fractal-design.com

PSU

Be Quiet! Dark Power Pro 11 850W Power Supply

$279

bequiet.com

SOUND

Sennheiser PC 373D

$329

en-au.sennheiser.com

DISPLAY

Asus ROG Strix XG32VQ

$859

www.asus.com/au

KEYBOARD

Cooler Master MK750

$189

www.coolermaster.com

MOUSE

SteelSeries Sensei Ten

$119

www.steelseries.org

TOTAL: **$4,498**

THE BEAST

When overkill is barely enough...

CPU + COOLING

AMD Threadripper 2 2990WX + Corsair H105

$2,699 + $145

amd.com

MOBO

Asus ROG Zenith Extreme

$559

asus.com.au

VIDEO

Nvidia GeForce RTX 2080 Ti

$1,899

nvidia.com/en-au

MEMORY

4x8GB G.Skill Trident Z RGB quad-channel 3466MHz DDR4

$745

gskill.com

STORAGE

Samsung 960 Pro 2TB + Seagate Barracuda Pro 10TB

$1,589 + $599

samsung.com/au

CASE

Thermaltake Level 20 GT

$369

thermaltake.com.au

PSU

Corsair RM1000i Special Edition

$279

corsair.com/en-au

SOUND

Steelseries Arctis Pro + GameDAC

$349

steelseries.com

DISPLAY

Alienware AW3418DW

$2,099

alienware.com

KEYBOARD

Corsair K95 Platinum RGB

$249

corsair.com/en-au/

MOUSE

Corsair M65 RGB Elite

$85

rcorsair.com/en-au/

TOTAL: **$11,665**

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HotWare, with Terrence Jarrad

01

01 COURANT CARRY

PRICE $230 • **DISTRIBUTOR** COURANT
staycourant.com

Portable power-banks can be lifesavers when you're without access to somewhere to plug in. The problem is the cable you need to charge with is another thing to accidentally leave at home, lose, or is just plain awkward to use on the move. The Carry solves all of that.

POWERED UP: Suave pebbled leather case. 8000mAh wireless charging, which means two full charges for the majority of phones out there. Can even stack-charge this and your phone at the same time on cabled wireless charger.

PLAYED OUT: Up to 5x pricier than cabled solutions!

02

02 HOT WHEELS TESLA CYBERTRUCK

PRICE $600 • **DISTRIBUTOR** HOT WHEELS
hotwheelscollectors.mattel.com

Most of us won't be able to afford the real version of this futuristic vehicle, so if we want to break its "armour glass" windows on stage in front of the whole world, we'll have to settle for this smaller version.

POWERED UP: 1:10 scale, remote control, with working head/tail lights. Actually comes with a reusable cracked window vinyl sticker - no joke.

PLAYED OUT: While it wasn't due until Dec 2020, it's already sold out, so unless there's a second round of units produced you might have to stick to the $30 1:64 scale version also being released.

03

03 HANDHELD OREGON TRAIL

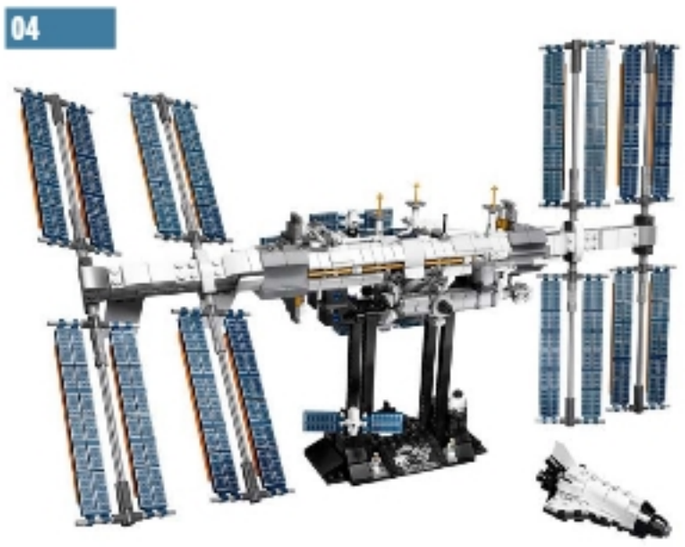
PRICE $40 • **DISTRIBUTOR** AMAZON
amazon.com

Have you ever just wanted to carry dysentery around in your pocket? Neither have we. It sounds unhygienic. But you can, with this singularly committed device, that plays Oregon Trail.

POWERED UP: Looking a bit like an old Apple computer, the 2.5in backlit LCD is sharp enough to read the tiny text, make tiny decisions, and yep, die of tiny dysentery.

PLAYED OUT: Build quality is a bit so-so. No headphone jack, so enjoy that tinny speaker. Controls are bad for the hunting minigame.

04



04 LEGO ISS

PRICE $99.99 • **DISTRIBUTOR** LEGO
lego.com

If you...r kids have an interest in all things space and science, then consider getting (them) an International Space Station they can build themselves! Your kids. Definitely not you. You're a grown adult with no need for toys like this, after all.

POWERED UP: 864 pieces of SPAAAAACE. Comes with rotating solar panels, a shuttle to dock, a satellite to launch, and a couple of adorable tiny microfig astronauts.

PLAYED OUT: This one seems more like a display piece than anything. Hmmm. Maybe it's not for the kids after all!

05

05 ZERO SR/S

PRICE $34,000 •
DISTRIBUTOR ZERO

When talking about electric motorbikes, Zero is the name that pops up the most. It's a company that's been around for years, has a range of products, and recently, has reengineered its designs for 2020.

POWERED UP: A 300km range, if you take the optional power tank. Up to 95% charge in two hours. A top speed around the 200km/h mark.

PLAYED OUT: Importing is the only way to get one at the moment. Zero used to have local representation put also pulled out a few years ago due to Australia's apparent lack of interest in electric vehicles.

GAMES OF 2020
What to watch for this year
PC CASE GROUP TEST
The best chassis to keep your PC gear running cool
PATH OF EXILE 2
Returning the game for fun and profit
AUSTRALIA'S #1 PC GAMING MAG
PC PowerPlay
SINCE 1996
CAN BLIZZARD KEEP FANS HAPPY WITH ITS LATEST FORAY INTO HELL...
DIABLO IV
WE GO HANDS-ON TO FIND OUT.
DOOM ETERNAL
THE CLASSIC SHOOTER IS BACK, AND MORE BRUTAL THAN EVER BEFORE!
DOTA UNDERWORLDS
HOW VALVE LEAPT ONTO A WHOLE NEW GAMING PHENOMENON, AND CREATED A MASTERPIECE
FUTURE
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act id:65706547

Why I love...

Being a healer in Final Fantasy XIV

Fighting is all well and good, but someone has to don the white robes.

RELEASED AUGUST 24, 2013
finalfantasyxiv.com

RIGHT: Enormous explosion? Definitely wasn't me.

From the outside, being a healer in Final Fantasy XIV – or any MMO – might seem like a boring, thankless job. After all, your mission is to keep your party alive while they get to look all sexy and cool caving a monster's head in with an axe – and if the party dies, you're usually the one to blame. But appearances are deceiving. Any player worth their salt knows how integral a good healer can be to any successful party, and more than anything, I love being that healer.

If you've never played, the concept might seem a bit foreign. But Final Fantasy XIV, like practically every MMO, follows a very simple template for the composition of adventure groups. One player plays the tank, whose sole purpose is to be a human shield for their weaker party members and keep monsters' attention focused on them. A few other players are the 'DPS' or damage-dealers and their job is to beat the living tar out of those monsters. And, finally, there's the healer, who keeps everyone alive.

Compared to those other roles, it's no wonder most players prefer to play DPS. In Final Fantasy XIV that means being one of a dozen badass classes like a meteor-dropping Black Mage or a spear-wielding Dragoon that leaps around the battlefield impaling baddies. Your entire mission is to spam carefully thought out button combos and melt health bars. Comparatively, healers spend most of their time running around topping off other players' health bars or removing nasty debuffs so they can perform more optimally.

But being the healer is so much fun because it's not a role that demands the spotlight. My job is to help other players do their job. It's emotionally fulfilling in an unexpected way, and I'm completely hooked on it.

BRINGING THE FUN

Back when MMOs first became a pop culture phenomenon with World of Warcraft, the simple fact that I was adventuring with strangers was novel and exciting. Whether I was running a dungeon with other players or just exploring the world, I was always painfully aware that everyone around me were other humans. Over the past few decades, though, that feeling has faded considerably – largely because MMOs began to cater to convenience with features like automatic matchmaking that slowly squeezed the social aspects out of playing. Now when I run a dungeon, I don't really need to talk to my team because they're all strangers from other servers and once we defeat the boss I'll never see them again. Because of that, many players objectify their teammates, seeing them only as a means to an end. They might as well not be real players at all.

Being the healer, though, makes me keenly aware that I'm playing with other people, because most of the time I'm having to fix their mistakes. If a DPS messes up, there's little the tank can do to rectify it. I think that's why so many players get mad at each other in MMOs. They lash out not only in frustration but also in helplessness.

As a healer, I have the power to fix all of that and ensure everyone has a positive experience. I am the king of fixing mistakes. If the DPS takes a hit they should have avoided, I can heal that. If the tank screws up a complex manoeuvre that results in the party taking heavy damage, I can heal that too. More than any other class, I have the power to turn what could be a negative experience into a positive one. It just depends on whether I can do my job well.

This might sound like an oxymoron, but I feel a weirdly humble sense of pride in being a good healer. If I can manage my mana and spell cooldowns properly, I'm doing more than merely keeping my team alive. I'm helping them have fun. In a way, I'm given the heavy responsibility of setting the tone for a group of strangers taking on enormous challenges together. There's already so much toxicity online, and it's nice to know a Cure spell can be the difference between a good party or a bad one. STEVEN MESSNER PC

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HEALTH BENEFITS

The pros and cons of playing a healer in **FFXIV.**

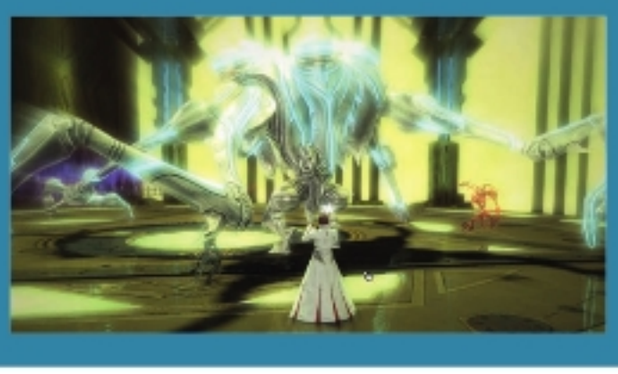
PROS

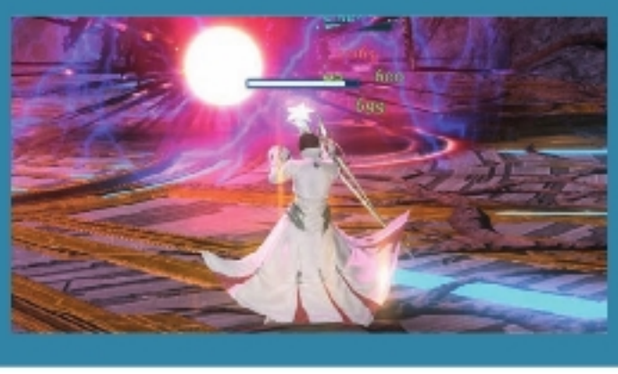
- Healers are always in high demand.
- You get a special unicorn to ride around on.
- Everyone likes you when you do well.

CONS

- You have to wear the dumbest costumes.
- Few attack spells, fighting alone is difficult.
- Everyone hates you when you don't do well.

LEFT: White Mages get an iconic set of robes to wear.





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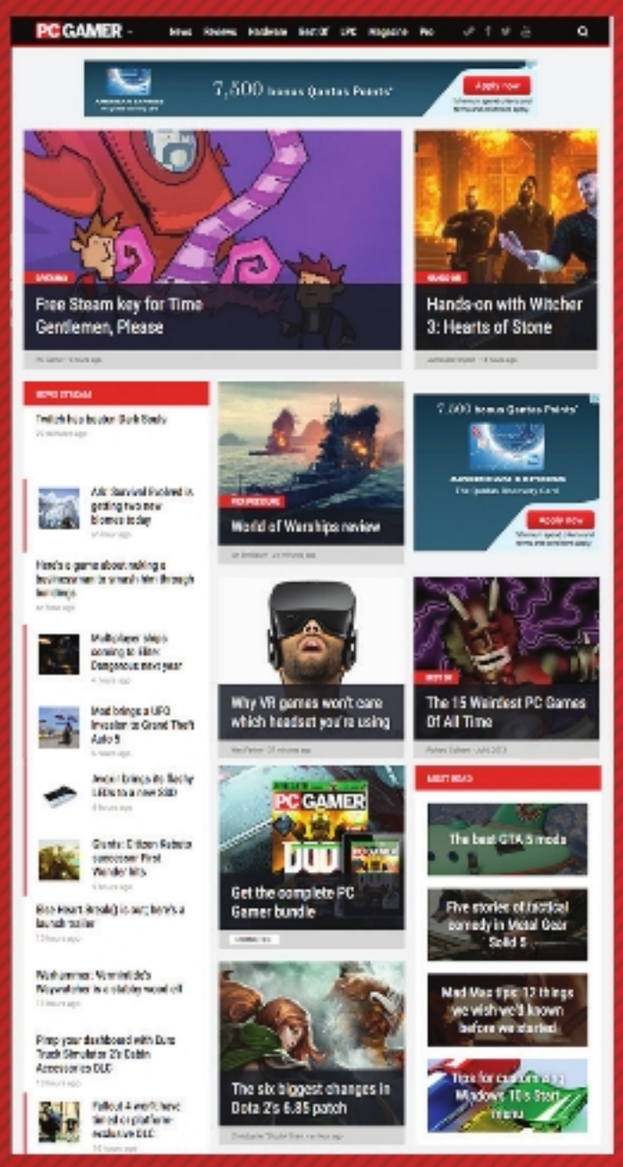
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